

Self Esteem

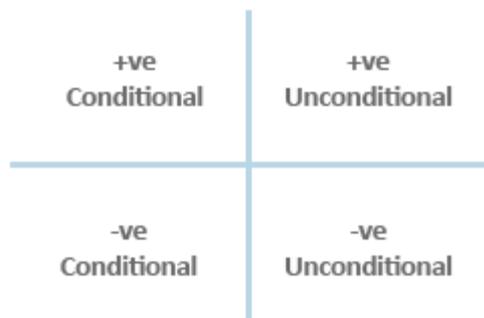
General points

Building children's self-esteem is an important part of parenting – but what exactly do we mean by 'self-esteem'? Is it about just giving lots of praise and avoiding putting children down?

One useful way of looking at self-esteem is to think of it in relation to how children get noticed. All children – and indeed all adults – have what's known as a hunger for recognition - to be noticed by others. Initially this is satisfied through physical touch (think of the baby being stroked and held by adoring adults).

As the child grows older, she becomes more sophisticated in picking up on the ways others give her recognition - the verbal messages, the non-verbal messages that accompany the verbal (eg scowling, smiling). These are all known as 'strokes' or 'units of recognition'.

These strokes can be positive and negative. They can be offered for what the child has done (conditional - 'What a great model you've made') and for simply 'being' (unconditional - a smile as they walk in the room, a cuddle, 'I love you'). This is illustrated in the matrix below:



Positive conditional strokes communicate APPROVAL – essentially 'I like what you did there'.

Negative conditional strokes communicate DISAPPROVAL.

Positive unconditional strokes are the ways we let our child know that they are ACCEPTED simply for who they are.

Negative unconditional strokes communicate REJECTION.

Remember – any of the 4 types of strokes can be communicated non-verbally as well as verbally.

You might want to think about the diet of strokes that are offered in your family :

- **What sorts of things does your child DO that gets your positive recognition? How do you do this (words, gestures)?**

- **Negative conditional strokes include the ways in which your child knows from you that they have done something wrong – just because it says ‘negative’ doesn’t mean it’s ‘bad’. How do you communicate when they’ve done something wrong?**
- **What’s the balance between positive and negative conditional strokes? If you would like to change it, what specifically could you do – ignore some of the behaviour that gets too much negative attention?; spot a bit more the positives – and let your child know that you’ve spotted them? Remember – you stroke what you get and you get what you stroke!**
- **How are you doing with the positive unconditional – letting your child know that they are accepted simply for being them?**

It’s also really important that parents/carers take care of their own self-esteem. There’s a saying – ‘You can only give what you’ve received’. Whether this is totally true, it does highlight how if our own self-esteem is low, we may well find it hard to give a good diet of strokes to our children. If you find yourself seeing too much of the negative in what you are doing, try and shift the balance. Note what is going so well – but then make sure that you are picking up on what’s going well or well enough. In what ways are you being a ‘good enough’ parent?

Improving self-esteem – some pointers

Raising self-esteem takes time and patience. In particular, children need to:

Hear - the positive strokes - many youngsters with low self esteem will not be tuned in to the positive strokes being offered - establishing eye contact can be helpful here to make sure they are tuning in.

Receive – those with low self-esteem will often reject the positive strokes - 'She doesn't really mean that'.

Internalise - this will be a gradual process as the youngster is invited to rewrite his/her perception of themselves.

Below are some suggestions for effectively communicating positive strokes:

- Using 'I' statements makes it harder for youngsters to reject the positives being given. Contrast 'Well done', 'Great' etc with 'I like the way you helped your brother with his homework. Thanks', 'I am impressed with' 'I was pleased to see that you ..'
- Be specific - 'I like the way you have cleared your bedroom floor – and you’ve tidied up your bookcase.'
- Privately understood messages - eg a hand on the shoulder, a thumbs up etc etc can be useful
- Be more measured in the giving of positive strokes - avoid the temptation to give too many as they are likely to be rejected.
- Encouraging your child to accept where they are - that they don't have to aim for perfection; Having permission to fail.
- Adult modelling - 'it's ok to make mistakes'.
- Challenge 'I must' and 'I should' statements.

A really powerful tool for building self-esteem is SCALING. Click here to find out more (the examples given are for use in the classroom but you will quickly see how you can adapt them to using them at home.) <https://www.behaviourwall.com/dev/resources/solution-focused.php>