

# Girls' Self-Esteem: Positive Experiences and Influences

by

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Positive self-esteem in adolescents has been linked to good school performance and good health (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006). It has also been found that those with positive self-esteem early in life usually experience it again later in life (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). On the other hand poor self-esteem in adolescents has been linked to many negative behaviors and disorders including poor body perception, depression, eating disorders, dropping out of school, poor social skills, puberty, suicide, teenage motherhood, and the list continues (Barlow, 1992; Barrett, Webster, & Wallis, 1999; Lent & Figueira-McDonough, 2002; McVey, Davis, Tweed, & Shaw, 2004; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Since the negative results of poor self-esteem can be traumatic it is understandable why so much research has been conducted on this subject.

Children of both genders start out with a healthy and strong self-esteem which diminishes sometime around the transition from elementary school to junior high/middle school, or from approximately the ages of 13 to 17. Of the two genders females experience the biggest drop in self-esteem, some researchers calculate it to be twice as much as boys (Barlow, 1992; Eccles, 1989; Powell, 2004; Royse, 1998). Knowing that self-esteem declines in children as they get older makes it important to help children develop skills necessary to maintain a high sense of self-esteem. This positive self-esteem is a result of the positive experiences and feedback a child experiences as it matures (Powell, 2004).

Positive experiences come from experiencing successes. Successes are a result of exposure to many different challenging activities from birth through young adulthood. When these challenges are achievable, age appropriate, and have the support of adults, the child experiences

success and from these successes comes self-confidence, success in school, self-motivation, and positive self-esteem (Guindon, 2002; Powell, 2004).

The feedback a young person receives affects self-esteem accordingly. Girls are more receptive to personal interactions than boys and therefore are more responsive to feedback. The feedback received from peers, teachers, parents, and society shapes how young girls see themselves, both positively and negatively (Barrett et al., 1999; Boyd & Hrycaiko, 1997; Guindon, 2002; Powell, 2004; Steese, 2006). Therefore giving girls positive feedback is important to maintain and improve positive self-esteem.

There are two groups that have a profound impact on young girls' self-esteem and can provide them with positive experiences and feedback. These two groups are parents and intervention programs.

Contrary to popular belief, parents have a greater impact on an adolescent's self-esteem than peers (Demo, Small & Savin-Williams, 1987). Parental encouragement and support, from birth onward, of a young girl's achievements both in school and out can be a defense against negative influences. To create the confidence and feelings of self-worth in young girls, parents should provide them age appropriate activities including sports, art, music, and work (Barlow, 1992; Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Demo et al., 1987; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Lent & Figueira-McDonough, 2002).

The other group that has an impact on girls' self-esteem is the self-esteem intervention program. An intervention program teaches skills to enhance self-esteem and to reduce the impact of negative influences (Steese, Dollette, Phillips, Hossfeld, Matthews, & Taormina, 2006). A gender specific intervention program is recommended because of the differences in learning and socialization between the genders. Girls tend to be more socially responsive, deriving their self-worth from other's feedback. Their learning styles are different and they are not as competitive as boys. When in a mixed gender program girls tend to take a backseat to the

boys (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006). Intervention programs provide both positive experiences and positive feedback that provides the girls with the knowledge and skills needed to face future stressors.

To be successful an intervention program must be started early. The decline in self-esteem occurs just before, and during, the young girls' transition from elementary school to junior high/middle school and continues into adolescence. Implementing an intervention program in high school is like closing the barn door after the horse has escaped, the young girls have already experienced the decline in self-esteem (Boyd & Hrycaiko, 1997; Lent & Figueira-McDonough, 2002; Powell, 2004, Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005).

During the fifth through seventh grades young girls experience many stressors that may lead to low self-esteem. These stressors include puberty and transferring to junior high/middle school which has a very different environment from the elementary school environment. Puberty involves physical changes such as weight gain or loss that may be perceived negatively by peers (O'Dea & Abraham, 2000). The junior high/middle school experience is impersonal, requires time management, is compartmentalized, the teachers are less supportive, and the girls are introduced to a new social environment (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Eccles, 1989).

Gender specific intervention programs offered in fourth or fifth grades have been shown to have the greatest impact on these stressors (Boyd & Hrycaiko, 1997; McVey et al., 2004). Successful intervention programs provide positive feedback and teach young girls life-skills such as problem solving, project planning, positive body image perception, and sound eating behaviors which better prepares them for the future changes and stressors in their lives (McVey et al., 2004; O'Dea & Abraham, 2000).

The five girls' self-esteem intervention programs reviewed for this study were of various durations, the longest of which was ten weeks. All the programs were offered at school, either during the class day or after school. The long term changes in the girls' self-esteem were

variable including one program which showed no change in self-esteem. It may be that program length influenced the long term effects of these programs (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006; McVey et al., 2004; O'Dea & Abraham, 2000; Steese et al., 2006).

It is important to expose the girls to positive experiences and give them positive feedback. Parents do influence young girls and are on the front lines of helping the girls maintain a healthy self-esteem. To aid parents the intervention programs, also known as girls clubs or groups, are a wonderful resource.

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