

## Self-Esteem—Is It Selfishness?

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*Dale G. Simpson, Ph.D.*

Psychologist

Since the 1970s, self-esteem has been a buzzword in schools and childcare. Countless books extol the virtue and necessity of loving yourself and seeing only the good within. Quite rightly, Christians have scrutinized these writings and their underlying philosophies. Over the years I have read Christian opinions on this topic that ranges from wholehearted endorsement to vilification. Is self-esteem a virtue or a humanistic evil?

### **What Do You See in the Mirror?**

Self-esteem is the emotional reaction we have to ourselves. This emotional evaluation of ourselves occurs in all humans and is similar to the way we form impressions of others. Humans constantly assess things, people, and experiences that flow in and out of life. It is natural, then, that as we grow up, we come to some judgment about our own goodness and badness.

What contributes to this evaluation of the self? In infancy we are drawn to things that are pleasurable and satisfying. Likewise, we are distressed by and want relief from those things that are painful or uncomfortable. If the environment and the adults in our world provide relief and protection from distress in a reasonable amount of time, the world feels safe and trust begins. By age one, infants are aware of themselves. A recent Yale study shows that infants have a basic awareness of “good” and “bad” by the age of six months (some as early as three months)<sup>1</sup>. As children grow, they also internalize others’ reactions to them, further contributing to a disposition toward the self. With inconsistent or traumatic early experiences, a child could wrongly conclude that he/she is “bad.”

This internalization (or taking in of the attitude others have of one’s self), happens whether anyone likes it or not. This developmental process is part of God’s created program and cannot be prevented. Our only choice is monitor what our children internalize, and try to steer it toward the good. When we act unkindly toward our children, it can cause long-lasting damage to their self-esteem.

### **Do You Like Yourself?**

Self-esteem grows from a budding sense of accomplishment and competence in this world. The child begins seeing himself succeed in conquering many of the things other people are conquering, causing him to feel a sense of personal effectiveness and equality with others. This is a natural stage of development that must be achieved to produce a mature person. Self-esteem is not conceit or pride; these are inadequate attempts to hide or compensate for weakness and pain. Proud behavior is insecurity-based, where the person is driven to convince others (in reality, to convince himself), that he is okay. When you see someone

with a style of criticizing others and showing how he always does things better, you are seeing some of the outward manifestations of low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is also seen in overly aggressive and competitive people who are driven to win at everything.

### **The Ghost of Childhoods Past**

Many fathers are still acting out this insecurity with a compulsion to win at the board games or basketball games they play with their children. I know of men who leave their children crying when they play checkers or wrestle on the floor, all because of their “must win” competitiveness and the fear of facing the feelings of inadequacy in themselves. Low self-esteem can also be seen in depressive and passive behavior styles. Fear of failure and displeasing others can drive someone to adopt a please-at-all-cost approach to relationships. The need to be reassured by others creates a person with a fuzzy identity who cannot take a strong stand in relationships because of his dependency needs. These individuals hide low self-esteem by trying to achieve perfect behavior. They can be very controlling yet terribly afraid on the inside. Low self-esteem creates a need for the person, whether he is compensating by aggressiveness or passivity, to prove something about himself—something that is good, smart, likable, better than others, competent, etc. in relation to others. That sinking feeling from childhood can overshadow and stifle one’s progression in life.

As Christians, we have free will and cannot erase the effects of our rebellious nature from the universe. Christianity is a grace-based religion, and that gives us freedom. Even as sinners, we are created in the image of God and we know that Christ died for us. We know that all people are capable of the same set of rebellious, selfish attitudes and behaviors. There are no good and bad people from that point of view. As I have heard it said, there is level ground at the foot of the cross.

However, we must not fall into "worm theology" that confuses our moral condition with our value as a person. To become preoccupied with our children's sinful natures and to see them only as selfish creatures who naturally don't want to learn is to miss the point. This mistake is made more easily when one does not have a Biblically-based perspective on development.

### **Love and Acceptance**

For a healthy view of themselves, children need not feel like they are less than other people. They need to see our value of them and internalize a positive view of themselves. They need to feel what we feel as Christians, that they are "acceptable in the Beloved." There are countless ways we can communicate value to our children and several of them are as follows:

1. Choose to value them and their feelings. Make it a practice to look deeply into their eyes and think of the tender, vulnerable person in there who is naturally seeking to learn from you who they are.

2. Communicate respect by asking them (rather than ordering them) to do things. It's still an implied order but it feels so much different to be asked. Also, say "thank you" after they complete the task.

3. Face the effects of our emotional blow-ups. Since our children internalize what they think is our attitude toward them, make it a top priority to change if you are explosive. Pray, look into what causes your behavior, and commit to your family that you will change it. Tell them they are not at fault when you blow-up.

4. Regularly tell each child that you are "pleased" and "satisfied" with them as a son or daughter. Do this when they haven't performed anything special. Do this ten minutes after you have had to discipline the child. Tell them regularly that they are just the way a 10 year old (or whatever their age) should be. Tell each child at various times that you would love to have five more just like them.

5. Help them feel competent in the things of life. Avoid overprotection, which unwittingly strips away a sense of competence. Point out even embryonic success in a child's behavior. Teach them to fail with grace and dignity, not with shame and blame.

Self-esteem is an important factor in our children's development and in their ability to learn. We will leave inside each of our children a legacy of emotions that will define how they feel about themselves for many years to come. Leave a good and Godly word within them. Help them to not fall in love with themselves (the Bible never directs us to be self-centered) but rather teach them to fall into acceptance of themselves. It's the ultimate gift we can give.

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Dale Simpson, PhD, is the father of five grown children. As a practicing psychologist for more than 36 years, he has counseled children, teens, adults and couples and is currently practicing in Venice, Florida. Dr. Simpson was a co founder and publisher of Homeschooling Today Magazine, wrote a column called Inside the Family for the magazine, served as a featured speaker at numerous state education and parenting conferences, and is the publisher of Learning for Life Press. A Study in Wisdom, Homeschooling for Life, The Easy to Make Paper Airplane Book, and the Think It, Feel It, Say It board game are published by Learning for Life Press. [www.learningforlifepress.com](http://www.learningforlifepress.com)

<sup>1</sup> "The Moral Life of Babies," *NY Times*, 2010.