



# THE CONFIDENT CHILD

**Raising Children to  
Believe in Themselves**



**TERRI APTER**



*"Convincing, well-written and truly helpful." —Publishers Weekly*

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## PRAISE FOR THE BOOKS OF TERRI APTER. PH.D.

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On *The Confident Child*:

“Convincing, well-written and truly helpful...suggests concrete ways for parents to help their children like themselves and feel confident.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Terri Apter convinces the reader that she is on our side and even has a useful chapter called ‘How to Be an Imperfect Parent Without Ruining Your Child’s Life.’ Her wisdom is tempered by warmth and rueful acknowledgment that she hasn’t always got it right herself, which is totally disarming.”

—Mary Hoffman, author of *Amazing Grace*

On *Altered Loves*:

“Simply wonderful—a fresh vision that blows away old stereotypes, dated theories, male biases and familiar patterns of blame. It is a model of lucid research and writing.”

—*The New York Times*

On *Working Women Don’t Have Wives*:

“She touches a resonant chord...provides a useful focus on the sources of the enormous resistance that makes change so difficult.”

—*The New York Times*

“A thoughtful analysis of an extraordinarily complex problem.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

On *Secret Paths*:

“Lively and revealing...Apter also provides insightful passages on the balance of power as it shifts in midlife marriages; on love and disengagement in the relationship between midlife women and their mothers; and on the nature of love and experience as they apply to women at this time in their lives.”

—*The New York Times*

“An extremely important book...Her writing offers perceptions rare in psychology.”

—Carol Gilligan

## **ALSO BY TERRI APTER**

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*Altered Loves: Mothers and Daughters during Adolescence*

*Working Women Don't Have Wives: Professional Success in the 1990s*

*Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife*

*The Myth of Maturity: What Teenagers Need from Parents to Become Adults*

*You Don't Really Know Me: Why Mothers and Daughters Fight, and How Both Can Win*

*The Sister Knot: Why We Fight, Why We're Jealous, and Why We'll Love Each Other No Matter What*

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# **The Confident Child**

**Raising A Child To Try, Learn, And Care**

**Terri Apter**

**W. W. NORTON & COMPANY • NEW YORK • LONDON**

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for **Miranda, Julia, Brian, and Adrienne**

# Acknowledgment

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I wish to thank the parents and children who attended my workshops in Cambridge, shared their problems, and tested solutions with me. Their optimism, humor, warmth, and trust were crucial to shaping this book. In the course of the past ten years, ongoing conversations with my sister, Marion Quinn, persuaded me that parents needed a book to help them motivate and support their children. Together we mused over the difficulty of sustaining a very young child's exuberant confidence through the challenges of middle childhood. As parents, we felt that in our most important job we faced an obstacle course through which we wanted to preserve a child's goodness, while shaping character. We pooled observations about effective methods of discipline. We wondered how we would sustain our influence as our children made their way in school and among peers. Geographical distance did nothing to impede these conversations, but I wanted to give them a broader canvas and a research-based structure.

This aim was facilitated by conversations I had with Judy Dunn and by her work on the connections between emotion and understanding in development. Her ability to combine theoretical sophistication with day-to-day observations helped structure my sense of the important ways parents can pass on their knowledge about emotions to children. Jim Gilligan's searching questions about the importance of self-esteem inspired me at a time when I had only the vaguest notion of embarking on this project. Throughout the past ten years, Nancy Chodorow, Mary Jacobus, Michelle Stanworth, Sandra Gilbert, and Mary Hamer have offered essential reality checks to problems and questions that have arisen in our mutual—but very different—parenting experiences. I see this book not as an end, but as a continuation of such conversations that are going on between parents everywhere.

My agent, Meg Ruley, was always available as a sounding board for my ideas, and her attention has been invaluable. My editor, Jill Bialosky, while experiencing one of the most demanding phases of parenthood herself, continued to parent this project with her expert guidance and support.

## Building Blocks

**M**any years ago, as a sophomore in college, I worked as an assistant on a study of children's motivation. My job consisted of greeting the child and parent as they arrived at the research unit, handing the parent a permission and information form to fill in, and seating them in the room in which the study was to take place. After two further parent/child couples went through the same process, I brought out a large box filled with wood blocks of different colors, sizes, and shapes, and explained to the children, who ranged from two to five years of age, that they were to build the best tower they could build with these blocks, and that someone would judge which child's tower was really the best. The parents were then led from the room. I told the children when to begin, when to stop, and gave a signal for the "judge"—a Ph.D. student—to enter. He studied the towers closely, nodded from time to time, muttered to himself, and took notes. He then declared one to be "the best" or "the winning tower." This process was repeated three or four times before the session was declared to be at an end.

This procedure in fact had nothing whatsoever to do with assessing children's skills in building towers. The declaration that a tower "won" was random. The aim of the study was to observe children's responses to success or failure. Their responses were filmed, and then analyzed by the researchers in charge. I did not see the films, but these scenes have never ceased their re-runs inside my mind.

When I began this job, I knew nothing about, and had no feeling for how children liked to be treated, for what adult behavior might be convincing or threatening or disturbing, for how children might be responding to the world around them. But the P.R. part I played was deemed inadequate by my employers for other reasons: I "disturbed" the study by comforting the losing child; I was insufficiently "neutral" as I described the process of the "game"; I sent messages to the children, even before they began, that the game should not be taken seriously.

It was not the youngest children who roused my empathy. The two- and three-year-olds were in some ways hard work, because they often had their own ideas about what they wanted to do with the blocks, or whether they wanted to play with them at all, but on the whole, their "winning" or "losing" was of little import to them. Most of these very young children seemed to note their success or failure dispassionately. "Oh," they might say, with a shudder of surprise, either to winning or losing; and whether they won or lost, they took great pleasure in demolishing the structure with one swipe. Some who won expressed surprise, and looked at their towers with new respect. A few did, even at age three.



seem disappointed or angry. But the crestfallen face or the stamp of rage was transient. Within minutes, they were back into the “game.” Disappointment simply did not stick to them.

It was the slightly older children whose behavior turned my routine into torture. When these children “lost,” a cloud descended upon them. One girl sat with her eyes fixed on her tower and touched it gently with the tip of her forefinger, up and down, as though to protect it. When I spoke to her, she seemed too embarrassed to face me. A boy who had constructed his tower with the utmost concentration, knelt beside his “losing” structure and gazed at it from beneath, humming to himself as he dismantled it, slowly, brick by brick. He then stirred the wooden blocks into a pile as though to remove any sign of his former efforts. After two or three such “failures to win,” the children became sullen and withdrawn and discouraged. They did not want to build another tower, they lost hope of winning and were irritated by my attempts to encourage them.

The oldest children in the study—the five-year-olds—were enormously pleased when they won, but they also showed increasing despair at losing. After being told that his tower “won,” a child raised his eyes from his own work and looked triumphantly at the loser. His body stretched, his hands were thrown high, his pride swelled. The losing child, on the other hand, seemed to shrink. He crouched down, focusing mournfully on his “losing” tower. Another child tried to cover her mood with an embarrassed smile. Her mouth was fixed into a stiff grin, and her eyes filled with tears. Some children were better at controlling their feelings, but the pain was still evident. One child looked at the winner with a forced smile, but hunched low and hugged her ankles. Another’s attempt at a smile was foiled by the twitching of her mouth, and the quick pulling in of her lower lip. When I coaxed her into reluctant speech, her voice was dull. Hearing her voice crack, she ceased speaking.

At the time, all those years ago, I think I was ashamed not so much of my participation in that cruel study but, strangely, of my knowledge as to how cruel it was, and how closely I identified with the children who lost. Surely, the successful college student would not share this knowledge of constant and confused failure. Surely, if I had been the sort of person I then wanted to be, I would not have been so close to their experiences of being crushed by competition. Their unguarded expression of pain brought home the unrelenting tension of my daily life and the question that nags every adolescent: If there are so many people who are smarter, more talented, more clearly focused than I, why should I keep trying and caring? I saw in them what I longed to be rid of: that sense of my deepest self being crowded out by my own inadequacies and others’ excellence. For these children now being socialized into the world I was experiencing, all I could do was signal that the judge’s verdict did not matter. I could, at least, stave off the day they might discover that it did.

What I must have known then, but ignored, was the fact that such competitive situations are inevitable. The young children who participated in that study were experiencing no more or less than they would in the classroom or on the playground. What I must have known, but then ignored, was that their suffering was a pale precursor to the struggles that older children engage in, as they build up their knowledge of skill, effort, and ability. Much later, as a parent, I colluded with this competitive world. Like many parents, I taught my children that doing well was important and that failures had to be overcome. Like many parents, in my children’s own best interests, I taught them to worry about their performance in school and on national exams. I insisted that to develop the skills they needed to thrive, they must sometimes win, and therefore I taught them to think better of themselves when they won than when they lost. However firmly convinced I was that they were of value no matter what, and that I would love them no matter what, I could feel anger, despair, or depression if they did not seem to be on track toward gaining the skills that are judged to be necessary to a good life. The college student who felt outraged that any child should be subjected to such a cruel competition became the

typical parent caught between the need to help her children develop their potential, and the wish that they be happy just being themselves.

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This daily battle to attain a balance between teaching children that they must do their best, and teaching them that they are “the best” regardless of what they do, is an inevitable tension in parenting. We do have to teach our children how to achieve, and we do have to encourage them to feel better about achieving than failing. We do have to work on their behalf—and sometimes against their inclinations—to inspire them to develop their potential. But while we do this, we risk making them feel awful about themselves. This self-defeat can consume enormous energy as a child seeks to protect herself from its blows. The child can create disguises and defenses that blind us to her real feelings and real needs. To help our children sustain that vital confidence that motivates them and fills them with hope for their future selves, we have to understand what self-esteem is. For self-esteem is the key to a child’s bright future. But what is it, and how is it maintained?

Self-esteem is now recognized as a key to children’s successful development. It is crucial to who children are and who they aim to become. Self-esteem has a far greater impact than intelligence or innate ability. Children who believe that they are valuable and effective, and who have the skills to behave in accord with these beliefs, have higher expectations of future successes, persist longer in tasks, and show higher levels of overall performance than other children, equally able, but less confident. *Emotional intelligence*, which is a crucial part of self-esteem, gives a child resilience and enables her to tolerate frustration, so that she can engage in sustained effort. This special form of intelligence also involves awareness of how her behavior affects other people, thereby inspiring concern for others and responsibility for her actions. These skills ground children as people who can live positively with others and achieve personal satisfaction in an increasingly complex and demanding society.

In our current and future cultures, people will need even greater inner strength to withstand change and uncertainty. We have to help our children find ways of valuing themselves and caring for others even when they face disappointments. Few of today’s children, it is expected, will have lifetime jobs. Employment will never be as secure as it was a generation ago. Skills demanded in any business or profession are proliferating and changing: Adults, in tomorrow’s society, will need to be flexible and adaptable and capable of meeting constantly changing challenges. They will require greater confidence and flexibility than we did, however competitive and crowded we may be finding our own adult world. Our children, as adults, will have to develop new ways of working together and conserving the environment. They will need to stand firm against increasing violence and social division. We need to pass on to our children a variety of ways of feeling proud so they do not have to resort to destructive ways of feeling proud. It is dangerous to suppose that they will simply “toughen up” or learn how to “handle difficulty.” We can depend on this: If a child does not have self-esteem—which means valuing her future and believing that she can influence her future—then there are two outcomes: depression or destruction. Depression stems from a sense of helplessness, from repeated experiences of failure and lack of control, and destructiveness is a violent defense against this helplessness as one vents anger against one’s loss of control and potential.

Self-esteem is not a single idea or feeling or belief. It is not constant self-admiration or even self-love but rather the presumption that one should persevere, take responsibility, make a positive difference in one’s environment. **Self esteem is a set of skills that allows a child to keep trying, to keep learning**

**and to keep caring.** These are skills that allow us to keep bouncing back when we experience disappointment, frustration, or failure, and to sustain positive engagement with other people. Too many programs meant to encourage self-esteem plug positive thinking and a barrage of self-praise: a child is instructed to tell herself she is “terrific” and “lovable.” Such purely ego-boosting practices leave the reality a child experiences—and needs to experience—out of account. As William Damon, an expert on the moral development of children, writes:

Children are remarkably bright and active when it comes to figuring out who they are. They have a searching understanding of self that few adults fully appreciate. They are aware of what they can and can't do; and they constantly probe their surroundings for feedback about their capabilities.

No self-esteem guide should ignore the reality of a child's self-discoveries. Nor, as we try to help our children sustain good faith in themselves, should we minimize the important role that their disappointments and frustrations take in their development of personal strength and stamina. When we talk about a child's self-esteem we are dealing with high stakes: our own child's future and the future of our society. As parents and people who care about a human future, we cannot afford *not* to understand how to sustain our children's self-esteem.

Many books on self-esteem are addressed to adults who feel the need to develop, or reinforce, or recapture their own self-esteem. Adults who have lost their self-esteem somewhere along the road to maturity are assured they can repair past losses and take greater control of their lives by repossessing the self-confidence and self-appreciation that was damaged at an earlier phase of development. Such books try to treat those childhood wounds that, once inflicted, leave scars that fester throughout adulthood. They help us trace our way back to earlier turning points, amending the wrong steps taken. Yet surprisingly little has been written about what we as parents can do to sustain the self-esteem of our children (especially that of children past the infant and toddler stage), to allow our children to grow to be adults who do not have to do this repair work, since harm was never done. In fact, we understand far more about how self-esteem can be damaged in childhood—through neglect or abuse—than we do about how it can be fostered, preserved, and reinforced.

This book deals with just that. It focuses on the crucial years from five to fifteen, when children learn to assess their abilities and form expectations of success or failure, and when their emotional intelligence is being formed. It addresses parents who want to gain a fuller understanding of how children develop their sense of who they are and how they relate to other people. It suggests ways that parents can spot problems in a child's *self theory* (ideas about who she is, what she is worth, and who she can become) and help the child sustain positive attitudes and correct destructive ones. It also deals with our inevitable imperfections as parents, and suggests ways that we can cushion the effects on our children of our own faults or failings. Since children need control and discipline, as well as freedom, responsibility and praise, I address the problems we, as parents, face in building up children's behavior without breaking down their belief in their basic goodness.

Since children also develop in school, and among siblings and friends, chapters are devoted to the role these experiences and relationships play in the development of self-esteem. In Chapter 6, I describe children's intense fear of failure, and suggest how we can help them through the challenges of classroom humiliations. Sometimes competition and discouragement arise within the family, especially within the context of sibling rivalry. The various responses children commonly have to siblings are described in Chapter 7, as well as suggestions for softening the impact of this frequently

brutal struggle for parents' love and approval. Children's friendships play a large role in their sense of self, their sensitivity to others, and their ability to interact positively with people around them. They compare themselves to their friends, and they learn about their own potential for relating to others in the course of passionate childhood friendships. I have therefore included a chapter describing development through friendship. Though we often are not at hand to help a child through the rough and tumble of life with peers, we can provide a child with skills to preserve the friendships she values and avoid the pressure of those that constrain her. Since the transition from childhood into adolescence is so complex, and so commonly misunderstood, I describe the new difficulties parents face with teenagers, and the ways in which we can work with our teenagers to overcome common misunderstandings. If we keep the lines of communication open, we can continue to help an adolescent build the sense of self that will well serve the adult the child is becoming. Finally, because a person's moral principles play a large part in self-esteem, I show how the skills outlined in this book can be used to meet the challenge to raise a moral child.

I generally refer to the child as "she," but my interest is in boys and girls alike, and—unless I make specific distinctions between boys and girls—the discussion is meant to refer to any child.

The material for this book is drawn from a variety of sources. The work of Erik Erikson remains of enormous value to any description of a developmental "task" or stepping stone along a path of personal growth. The work done by Gerald Patterson and his colleagues at the Oregon Social Learning Center has fascinated me for many years in its careful tracking of parent/child conflict, and I am grateful to them for supplying me with data. The work of Myrna Shure and George Spivack has inspired me with its emphasis on parent/child conversation as a means of drawing out a child's ability to solve her own problems. Daniel Goleman's formulation of emotional intelligence highlighted the ways in which skills and emotions are linked. His work convinced me that this age span—from five to fifteen—is particularly important to address, since it is during these years that a child's emotional intelligence takes shape. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan have revealed how adults' silencing of a child's thoughts, feelings, and desires can have soul-destroying effects. Their work has brought home to me the importance of allowing a child to have her say without being punished or judged or ridiculed.

The examples and practices described in this book come primarily from children and the parents who are struggling to realize their child's potential. From 1990 to 1995 I ran a series of workshops in which children of various ages were observed at home, in the classroom, and on the playground. Parents sometimes came to me with problems they had spotted or issues they were concerned about; but sometimes a child's behavior concerned me, and I would then invite the child to speak more fully about her experiences. I always worked with both the child and at least one parent. Whenever a specific problem was discussed and advice given, I tracked the effect on both parent and child. In this way, certain expectations about what could help and what could hinder a child's development of confidence and the potential that is expanded through confidence, were often revised. The quirks of children's minds have a compelling logic. Discovering the forgotten realities of children's experiences is a special pleasure, as well as a useful tool for parents. The child's vast hope and anticipation alongside the sense of being "small" and uncertain in a big, challenging world provide a window onto children's minds. It was clear that, for them, self-esteem is not a solid set of beliefs or a fixed psychological foundation, but a continuous process, both delicate and resilient. Raising children often seems like walking on a minefield. The most cautious step can trigger an awful explosion, whereas a

apparently foolish jump can be made without causing damage. Alternatively, we can look at child-rearing as a task in which there are lots of chances and frequent warning signals from which to learn. No book can map a perfectly safe path through that minefield. Each child is different, and each interchange between parent and child is characterized by a deeply personal context. No so-called expert can, in book form, take the rich variety of family life fully into account. I address the reader *parent to parent*: Though I draw on the experience and research of many writers and psychologists, I suggest that each parent makes use of all advice through her knowledge and experience of her own child. By offering descriptions of parenting styles that have often proved effective, I hope to help parents make the best of the many opportunities they usually have. A child's self-esteem is broad and deep and, like a strong, loving relationship, is not always felt in its entirety, but is always reparable. The good will that so many parents have toward their children needs to be harnessed so that cycles of unhappiness—and waste—can be broken.

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# Assessing Child's Self-Esteem

**C**hildren's self-esteem normally is not simply high or low. Instead, it is like a layered cloud that undergoes daily shifts in shape and intensity, varying with a child's own mood, the familiarity of the setting, the task at hand, the attitudes of the people around her.

## **What Self-Esteem Means to Children**

The psychologist who has conducted the largest study of children's self-esteem, Stanley Coopersmith, suggested that we imagine self-esteem as a kind of interior monologue a person holds—the self telling a story about the self. In particular, it is about the ability to do things, one's value as a person, and the significance of one's life. When a child does something, does she believe she will do it well? Will she succeed in what she tries to do? How does she measure up to other people? Does she worry about other people knowing more, being smarter or more skilled than she is? Does she worry whether they will like her or find her interesting? Does she wonder, anxiously, whether she will be able to join them in conversation or games or school tasks?

We can, as a rough guide, imagine a child with high self-esteem speaking to herself in the following way:

I'm a valuable and important person. I am at least as able and good as other people. People who know what I am worth will treat me well. I can make decisions about what to do and what to be, and those decisions count, both because I can carry them through and because what I decide and what I feel influences other people. My thoughts and my feelings matter; they make a difference. The world is full of people to meet and things to do, and I am happy to meet the challenges these different things offer. If I don't succeed in one task, or if one relationship doesn't work out, then others will because I am generally capable of making good friends and doing good work, and I'll keep succeeding in the future.

Life for this child is interesting rather than threatening. But a child with low self-esteem, or who holds what is sometimes called a "negative self-attitude" would think and respond quite differently:

I am not important, or likeable. I can't do what other people can do, and if someone asks me to do

something I won't be able to do it at all, or not in the way anyone thinks I should. I'm the sort of person other people will tease, or ignore, or abuse, and what I want doesn't matter, so I barely know what I want. I hate change, however uncomfortable things are now, because change will confuse me and make demands on me that I cannot meet. I don't have any control over what happens to me in the future; things may get worse but they won't get better.

These two very different monologues map out different attitudes; but in real life children's attitudes are not purely distilled as either one or the other. Until the age of about fifteen, when the selfconcept acquires much of its (more or less) permanent structure, children tread a fine line between these two opposing "monologues," stepping from one to the other with disconcerting ease. Their daily lives are chock-a-block with discoveries about their abilities, their powers, and their limitations. They feel confident in one situation, and not in another. It is not simply that, like adults, they know they can do one thing and not another—such as draw a picture of a tree, but not climb one. Their doubts are far more profound and elemental. They are in control of their lives when the school bell rings, but experience a revolution of confidence when someone is late to pick them up. Their world changes every day as does an adult's only in times of social upheaval and war. The ground on which a child stands shifts several times each day.

Not only does children's awareness of what they can do fluctuate, but so too does their sense of how others see them. One minute their behavior arouses delight in those around them; the next moment it invites intense displeasure. Jack, age seven, was happily at play with his younger brother, rubbing a balloon on his sweater, and then watching it stick, unheld, on the two-year-old's hair. His little brother grabbed the balloon, bit it, and burst it. His mother rushed in, and watched the toddler barely able to scream because the balloon skin was stretched across his face. "What the hell are you doing? Don't you know—never, never—to let him put a balloon into his mouth?" "I didn't know! I didn't know!" Jack cried. "Well, you should have known," his mother retorted. "And now you do." "But I didn't know," Jack wailed, his happy world suddenly shattered. He was no longer the good big brother, but the careless enemy.

Even at the age of eleven, Charlie was taken aback by the way a conversation with her mother could break down, and she could switch from being "a good sort of person to something real bad, really in the wrong." "I'm just talking about stuff—like, at breakfast I was making out a birthday list. And Mom's nodding, 'Okay. Make a list.' Then suddenly I get this, '*I don't want to hear another word!*' Because all of a sudden what I'm doing is some terrible crime, talking about my birthday when she's thinking about getting ready for work and I should be getting ready for school. Okay. I see what's happening. But I don't see it coming."

Children learn that they are agents, acting in the world and influencing things around them; but they also learn that their actions have unexpected consequences. They often learn the hard way, as adults deem them "naughty" or "bad" because their behavior has consequences that they could not know it would have. Sometimes they judge things just right, but often they do not, and they have to negotiate through a morass of injustice and self-pity. They live in the thick of acceptance and rejection—both from the voices of adults who switch from encouragement to anger with bewildering ease, and from friends who promise companionship but rapidly turn into accusers.

Just as uneven in children's daily lives are their experiences of successes and failures. They manage to ace a spelling test, but get a detention for forgetting their science homework. They are praised for their cooperation with a sibling, but are snubbed when they ask a classmate whether they can join a game. And because children seldom distinguish between the big and the small, the larger

successes cannot compensate for the minute failures.

~~If a child's self-esteem normally is so changeable, how can parents tell whether it is strong or weak? How can we know whether our parenting, as it is, is just fine for our child, or whether we need to change some of our parenting strategies in order to preserve our child's confidence? How do we know when our child is coping with these inevitable ups and downs in life, or whether her self-esteem is suffering?~~

## Knowing Our Own Child

By the time a child is five or six, parents think they know her pretty well. We know the patterns of her responses: to a hard day at school, to a good meal, to a lost or broken toy, to a day at the zoo. We know the rhythm of her rise to excitement and her sink into the doldrums. We know when she will be shy and when she will eagerly move forward. But this kind of knowledge may leave us with many gaps in our understanding of how a child is making sense of her world and assessing her position in it. A child of this age can now control many of her feelings. Some of her feelings about herself are so complex that she has no choice other than to contain them—or to express them in oblique ways.

Self-esteem involves a complex set of feelings and beliefs and expectations based on a child's changing skills in interacting with and influencing her world. There is no simple and sure method of assessing a child's self-esteem, or measuring the extent to which a child lacks it. If a child is asked directly whether she thinks she is capable of doing something, or whether she likes herself, she may speak with a confidence that she does not really feel, or she may be expressing a false confidence, one that does not buoy her up in real-life situations. It may sound right to say, "Yes, I'm good at making friends," or she may have learned that she is supposed to say good things about herself. In the abstract a child may believe the positive things she says; but when actually confronted with a friend-making situation, self-doubt may be activated and suppress this ability she believes she has. Elaine, nine, described herself as "very good" at math, but was tongue-tied when the teacher called on her in class and she explained a failure in a math test as a result of "my mind freezing even though the answers are there." She may well be right, but if she is not helped to find ways of identifying what she cannot do and dealing with her deficits, the "answers" trapped beneath the frozen mind will soon disappear. A child may believe that she can do great things—win medals as a gymnast, become President, fly the space shuttle—but not feel sufficiently confident to join a playground game or a school chess club. When eight-year-old Joe was asked about his tennis skills, he declared himself to be "the next Arthur Ashe," yet he refused to participate in a school tournament. A dream is not supportive if a child is afraid to test it by taking steps to realize it. Children's positive self-attitudes are of little use unless they have everyday access to them.

Because self-esteem is so complex, and so tricky to assess, I offer in this chapter a long check list of possible signs of low self-esteem. This check list offers parents some idea of the range of behaviors and attitudes that might be cause for concern. This list was compiled by Peter Gurney through his extensive work with children both as a teacher and a psychologist, and is suitable for children between the ages of five and fifteen. Since children are different in the home, with friends, and at school, there are three headings. Remember, this list is intended to *guide* a parent's assessment, it is not a scare list. All children will sometimes exhibit some of the characteristics on this list. Highs and lows in self-esteem are, after all, part of a normal child's experience. Parents should use this list to assess the different areas in which a child needs help.



*At home, the child with low self-esteem may behave in any of the following ways:*

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- *wishes she were someone else*

A longing to be someone else may show itself with excessive day-dreaming, or wishing to be younger and therefore relieved of the demands of maturity. The most marked and disturbing sign of this desire to be someone else is lying about things that would make a difference to who she is: For example, she tells her friends or teachers elaborate stories about how she lives or what has happened to her.

- *feels inferior or unworthy*

This can be seen in a child's low expectations of others' responses to her. She may seldom seek others' attention. She may become distressed when someone shows an interest in her. Admiration may confuse her—even to the point of tears.

- *cries frequently when faced with new or difficult tasks*

Some children have an intolerance of difficult tasks and constant anxiety about how they will perform. This can lead to frequent bouts of tears.

- *makes negative or derogatory comments about herself*

Most parents are accustomed to hearing their children make exaggerated claims for their abilities. A child with low self-esteem, however, may claim to “hate herself” or “wish she were dead.”

- *lacks energy*

Most children seem to burst with energy, but a child who feels helpless sees no point to trying. Moreover, a child who feels constantly anxious may be drained of energy. Sometimes such children even move slowly because they feel helpless or uncertain.

- *cannot tolerate ambiguity*

When a child lacks confidence in her own judgment, she will want everything to be spelled out—over and over again: She does not believe she will be able to understand anything that is not completely plain or simple. She may also be anxious about the consequences of misunderstanding. For example, if you ask a child to help the babysitter put her brother to bed, or take a phone message, or return a library book, she may be so worried she will not do something “right” that she is afraid to accept the responsibility of doing anything. “What if my brother cries?” or “What if I can't understand what the person's saying?” or “I don't know how!” she may protest, even though she is clearly capable of doing these things. A child with strong self-esteem, however, will be aware of her abilities, and less worried that something will confuse her.

- *is self-destructive/self-mutilating*
- 

Some children who claim to hate themselves may actually inflict harm upon themselves—usually by biting or scratching. A “clumsy” or “accident-prone” child may harm herself without thinking. Sometimes a child harms herself to get attention, which she feels she cannot get by any other, more positive route.

- *is poorly dressed and groomed*

This is common enough in children who have all too many other things to think about. But poor grooming *can* be a sign that a child does not enjoy thinking about herself or does not care about herself.

- *finds it difficult to make decisions*

This is another sign that a child lacks faith in her judgment and is anxious about the outcome of any choice. For such a child, choice, which should be empowering, only serves to remind her of what she is afraid she cannot do.

- *takes a pessimistic view of her future*

It is disturbing to hear a young person speak with dullness or despondency about her future. Yet some children see “nothing much” ahead, and therefore “don’t care what happens.”

*Among other children, a child with low self-esteem will exhibit some of these behaviors:*

- *bullies smaller/weaker children*

A child who feels weak herself, and is frustrated by lack of confidence, may try to feel powerful by frightening other children, especially those who frighten easily. She may want a companion in her fear, or she may want to appear “tough” to disguise her sense of powerlessness.

- *acts aggressively toward peers*

Some very good childhood friends are routinely aggressive to one another, but systematic aggression to a wide range of other children is a sign of a disturbing, general dislike of one’s peers. It was Aristotle who first suggested that liking for others depends on a liking for oneself. A child who wants to push other children away may be afraid that others will push her away.

- *lacks confidence with strange adults or new peers*

Shyness is common in children and is often linked to the temperament with which they are born. But if a child freezes up with any but the most familiar people, she may be afraid that new people will see her as “bad” or “inept.” Such intense shyness—or an inability to

express oneself and link up to new people—is also a concern because it can *lead* to low self-esteem. A child's sense of her social competence, or incompetence, plays an important role in establishing confidence.

- *finds difficulty in seeing others' points of view*

On the whole, children are quick to “read” people's thoughts and feelings; but this ability can be dulled by a child's belief that she cannot understand other people, or that there is little point in trying to monitor their views. If she has low self-esteem, she may give up trying to understand people.

- *is over-dependent on opinions of authority figures or high status peers*

A child who does not trust her own judgment, or is unable to act on her own initiative, tends to follow others who seem confident. A child who has no inner direction will choose friends who order her around, and will find authoritative adults attractive. Such a child craves other highly confident people, and relies on their instructions or ideas instead of developing her own.

- *gives away little personal information*

A child with low self-esteem assumes that she is of little interest to other people, and hence will not bother to reveal anything about herself. She will assume her ideas and feelings do not matter and that no one wants to hear of them. Again, this can be a *sign* of low self-esteem, but it can also *lead* to low self-esteem. When a child is slow to express her thoughts or feelings, she cannot influence others' decisions about where to go or what games to play. She therefore will have little experience of positive impact among peers.

- *avoids leadership roles*

A child with low self-esteem will often believe that she is incapable of organizing others or participating in decisions.

- *rarely volunteers*

A child who feels that she has little to offer, or is unlikely to act competently or satisfactorily, will not offer to participate in anything. She may also assume that people do not want her help, that they have already judged her and found her wanting.

- *is often withdrawn/socially isolated*

Believing that she does not know how to get other children's attention or keep them entertained, a child with low self-esteem may withdraw from other children. If she does try to join a group, her efforts are likely to be awkward and ineffective.

- *is rarely chosen by other peers*

One of the most disturbing things about low self-esteem in children is that it becomes a system of interlocking beliefs and attitudes which then is self-maintaining. A child who rarely volunteers, who offers little information about her thoughts and feelings, who does not reveal her ideas but depends upon directives from others, will rarely be chosen for games or teams or pair work. She is not particularly fun to be with, and seldom contributes to group spirit. Her experience then confirms her lack of confidence.

- *behaves inconsistently*

When a child does not trust her own judgment, or when she lacks appropriate self-control, she may behave inconsistently. She may, for example, be very quiet on the playground, when she believes she will not successfully engage other children's attention, and boisterous in the classroom, when she knows that her behavior will attract the teacher's attention. Or, she may misread certain situations. Teasing children may seem friendly to her, and a friendly gesture may confuse her, so she responds inappropriately. For example, she may follow a tease around, hoping to make friends, but be unresponsive to a friendly gesture, thereby giving up the possibility of making a real friend.

- *appears submissive/lacks assertiveness*

When a child is unaware that she is of value, she will submit to others' whims and orders. She may believe that it is natural for her to do what others tell her to do, and that her only chance of finding a place among her peers is in a submissive role.

- *attracts attention to herself*

Low self-esteem has many different and apparently contradictory manifestations. Some children, who think they are worth little and have little to offer, draw attention to themselves by boasting—about birthday parties, pets, parents' attainments, new purchases. Some children constantly clown or disrupt other children's games because they see no positive way of getting attention.

- *rarely laughs or smiles*

A child with low self-esteem often feels anxious—worried that she will let someone down, that she will not understand what is demanded of her, that others will for some reason or other dislike her. The “frozen” face of some children with low self-esteem stems from this anxiety.

- *makes derogatory remarks about peers*

When a child feels that she will not gain approval, she may take comfort in condemning others. She may complain about another child who is “rude and dirty,” “a bitch,” “real stupid,” or “a fool.” She finds comfort in looking down at others: If only, she believes, other people will join her in condemning someone else, they will not condemn her.

*A child may exhibit low self-esteem at school with any of the following behaviors:*

- *acts impulsively*

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This is another version of inconsistent behavior. A child who does not trust her judgment, and who is so anxious that she fails to take her time to monitor a situation, often acts before thinking. She may in some way see that her behavior is inappropriate, but she does not see how to improve it.

- *is easily distracted/has a short attention span*

This characteristic stems from a child's inability to believe that she can complete a challenging task. As soon as the going gets rough—if, for example, she does not immediately understand a reading passage, or cannot quickly solve a mathematical problem—her attention wanders. Frustration is necessary to learning. A confident child can tolerate frustration because she believes it will eventually ease—as she understands what she reads, as she begins to take steps to solve the math problem. A child who lacks confidence experiences frustration as failure.

- *suffers acute anxiety in new situations*

Some children with low self-esteem function well enough in very familiar settings. They may feel that no one will demand too much of them, and that they have worked out ways, in a familiar setting, to deal with the limitations they believe they have. But when a situation changes, they become terribly anxious because they feel different kinds of things will be expected of them. For example, a child may worry that she will not understand the homework instructions of a new teacher, or will not know when it is acceptable to ask to use the toilet.

- *suffers from personal mistakes and goes out of her way to avoid them*

No one likes to make mistakes, but a child with low self-esteem will find them particularly painful because they confirm her sense of inadequacy. A confident child will see a mistake—such as dropping a piece of chalk or making a mistake in the conjugation of a French verb or using a word incorrectly—as a minor mishap, or a fluke, whereas a child with low self-esteem will see the mistakes she makes as confirmation of her ineptness, as typical rather than accidental. In going out of her way to avoid mistakes, however, a child avoids challenges through which she can grow. This is another example of the ways in which low self-esteem becomes part of a self-reinforcing system.

- *lacks motivation*

When a child believes she will not succeed, she sees no point in trying. Motivation rests on the assumption that one can achieve something, or reach a goal; but a child with low levels of confidence feels ultimately helpless.

- *lacks persistence generally*

This characteristic is closely related to a short attention span. Persistence involves

continued effort, even when things get difficult. To persist, one has to believe that one has a fair chance of seeing a job through. Low self-esteem, however, involves the belief that one is more likely to fail.

- *follows rigid thinking patterns*

A child with low self-esteem does not expect others to respond sensitively or sympathetically to her, nor does she trust herself to “read” others’ expectations or responses. Therefore, she clings to a few set patterns of thought, such as “I must be nice and I must be quiet”—even if the teacher is trying to encourage the children to act out a play. As the math book is opened, she thinks, “This isn’t the sort of thing I can do.” She sticks with these thoughts simply because they are familiar to her. She rejects new ideas or suggestions—for example, about how to solve a problem or how to tell a story—because she is too anxious to try out new things.

- *seriously underestimates or overestimates her abilities*

It may seem strange that a child with low self-esteem may overestimate her abilities, but this is a common defense. She cannot confront her true abilities, and so she creates a fantasy. Also, to compensate for her sense of inadequacy, she may try to believe she is really extremely good at something that is not currently being challenged. She may, for example, believe that she is really an excellent musician or actor or singer, because no one judges her in these areas, whereas she knows she is under-achieving academically, because that work is monitored. On the whole, however, a child with low self-esteem is likely to have low expectations of herself because she underestimates her abilities.

- *sees success as the result of something outside her self*

This characteristic is terribly frustrating to people who are trying to help a child raise her self-esteem. When a child with low self-esteem does well on an exam, or wins a race, she will say she did well because “it was easy” or because “the teacher liked her” or because she was “lucky.” A confident child will say that she did well because she was “smart” or “knew the stuff” or “worked hard.” The confident child who does well sees her good work as a source of pride, and a confirmation of her abilities, but the child with low self-esteem cannot even use a successful experience—such as doing well on a test or scoring a goal—as a resource of self-confidence, because she does not take credit for it.

- *sees failure as a result of something within herself*

But what happens when a child fails? A confident child will see failure as a one-off event. She will say that she did not do well because she had a headache, or the exam was too hard, or the teacher was unfair—or because, this time, she did not study enough. But a child with low self-esteem will see failure as the direct result of her lack of intelligence or talent. She will explain that she “isn’t good at that,” or that she is “stupid.” Her unhappy experiences will enforce her sense of inadequacy, but her experiences of a positive outcome will not boost her confidence because she sees the reasons for good performance as

stemming from things outside her—luck, the teacher’s feelings, a “too easy” exam.

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- *assumes negative experience is typical*

As if this persistence in seeing herself as inept were not bad enough, the child with low self-esteem thinks that one failure is a sign of future failures. “I always get these problems wrong,” or “I always do stupid things like that,” are common responses in children with low self-esteem.

- *finds it difficult to work independently*

The child with low self-esteem may become dependent on bossy peers and authoritative adults because she wants others to tell her what to do. For the same reason—lack of faith in her own initiative—she would prefer not to work on her own in school. She often asks others what she should do, or whether what she is doing is “okay” because she is unsure she understands the assignment, or is slow to believe she can do it satisfactorily.

- *asks few questions*

At the same time she craves others’ help with her work, she may, in some situations, ask too few questions. She may refrain from asking them because she is afraid of appearing stupid, or she may simply be unsure that she can get someone’s attention, make herself understood, and understand the reply. For the same reason, she rarely answers teachers’ questions. Even when she knows the answer, she is unsure whether her answer is the one that is expected.

This check list does not offer a straightforward scale for measuring the severity of a child’s problem in the way a thermometer measures the extent of a fever. If one child exhibits nine characteristics on this list, and another child exhibits only three, this does not mean that the self-esteem of the first child is three times lower than that of the second child. The severity and persistence of each symptom should also be taken into account. A child who sometimes feels “down” and discouraged may be very different from a child who has low self-expectations even when she seems relatively content. The point of this list is not to ring alarm bells, but to help parents observe a child’s behavior and reflect on its possible range of meanings. If a group of characteristics on this list is displayed by a child, then a parent can use the following discussions in this book to draw a provisional map of the child’s problems, gain understanding of them, and—most important of all—intervene in a positive way.

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# three

## Helping a Child Overcome Low Self-Esteem

### **The First Target: Anxiety**

**P**arents can save a child from low self-esteem and prevent a child's natural "downs" and doubts from turning into low self-esteem, but positive action has to be well-considered and systematic. Low self-esteem is self-reinforcing, which means if a child has it, she will probably keep it. We cannot target one symptom on its own, because these symptoms are interlocked. A child who believes she is not good at math will be flooded with anxiety when faced with a difficult math problem; unable to work the problem, she will experience another failure, and thus enforce her belief that she has no mathematical ability. A child who believes that she is unlikeable will be reluctant to approach others; she will then lack experiences through which she can develop interpersonal skills. She will remain unable to interact positively with others, and will continue to experience rejection. But before I go on to describe the ways in which we can teach a child specific skills to improve behavior, effort, and outlook, I want to focus on the **emotions** that lock children into patterns of low self-esteem.

These emotional impediments to self-esteem will be targeted from many different angles throughout this book: For if we are to teach our child how to set goals and work toward them, we must alleviate the feelings that glue negative thoughts together. When we work with a child to develop her *emotional intelligence*—that is, the positive use of emotions to control her behavior, communicate her feelings, and respond effectively to the feelings of others—we can change the problematic beliefs and expectations that accompany and reinforce poor self-esteem. To help our child develop emotional intelligence we can engage in what psychologist John Gottman calls *emotional coaching*. This involves:

- talking to children about their feelings and those of others
- showing acceptance of those feelings
- helping them find acceptable ways of expressing their feelings

To begin this important task, we need to understand how emotions both hinder and help self-esteem.



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