

## learning for life



# Self-Esteem

Are you sure you want your child to have it?

by Robin Booth, Life Coach & School Principal

**I**t was time to begin. Rows of parents and teachers with eager faces were facing the front room anticipating the sharing of some knowledge that would support them in dealing with their children. This was a workshop on the 'Nurturing of Self-Esteem' and these people were committed to finding out more about how to do that so they could support their children's development.

But what is self-esteem? A possible definition of the word 'self-esteem' is the degree to which you value (esteem) yourself. As a concept this would relate to how much you value who you are, your opinions, your thoughts and the belief you have of your own qualities.

Yet the challenge, and often hidden component, of self-esteem, is not so much about the individual and how they value themselves, but when they have to place that value in relation to other people or other things ("I can't say "no" to you because I value your needs above my own so I will do what you ask even though it really comes at a cost to me").

"Are you really sure you want your child to have a high self-esteem?" I asked the parents. Many heads nodded with a decisive certainty that either comes from deep wisdom or from a 'good intention that hasn't yet been well thought out'. So I continued, "What would change and be the result if your children did have a high self-esteem?"

The responses varied: "They would pick up their clothes and be more proactive", "They would listen to what I say", "They would do their homework without me nagging them", "They wouldn't fight with their siblings", "They would be more confident and happy."

Even the intellectuals responded, "We don't want our children to labour through life putting everyone else's needs above their own; we want them to feel empowered and to know that they are worthy; we want them to value who they are and to fight for what they believe; we want them to feel that their attitudes and beliefs are also valued in our society."

We were beginning to unpack the underlying perceptions of what self-esteem may bring. I posed the following response: "So if your children now have a high sense of worth where they value themselves and their ideas, who do you think they will now say 'no' to when it undermines their own needs? And who will they now argue against when they feel something is unfair? To whom will they say, 'Sorry, this doesn't work for me anymore?' Who will they now stand up against when they feel their ideas and needs have an esteemed value and a place in the family? When they ask the question, 'But

why?' your answer is no longer sufficient if you reply, 'Just because I say so.'"

Recently, my seven-month old niece just figured out how to turn from lying on her back onto her stomach (and shortly to crawling after that). Her parents' faces showed much pride and delight in this achievement yet, as quick as they applauded this desired milestone, their eyes quickly looked around the room to see how this would really impact them.

Safety-net over the pool; gates at top and bottom of the stairs; kitchen cupboards locked; veranda balustrades re-done; all fragile artefacts and furniture to be placed somewhere high up out of reach. Getting your child to crawl is easy, making it safe to do so is another thing. Getting your child to voice their opinions is quite easy. Getting them to do so in a way that doesn't make you feel threatened or angry is another thing.

The real challenge of the nurturing of self-esteem is not so much in actually empowering your children (or in them now finding their voice). It's about how they *express* their sense of value in relation to the people around them. A child who now values themselves and stands up to something may say, "I am not going to do this anymore because you are unfair and I don't have to listen to you. So there!" Personally, I am certain this is not going to make the situation any better. What needs to happen from here is supporting the child in finding the appropriate way of communicating their needs and sense of worth that doesn't result in conflict.

As babies, children are very expressive and don't take into account if it's late at night or how tired you are. If they are hungry, they want to eat. If they are awake, they want to play (which I found out by the giggles and gurgling of my niece at 4am the other morning). As they grow up they begin to experience their parents' anger and threats and, as a consequence, they increasingly internalise and suppress their own needs and wants. Regrettably, this anger and frustration is not really aimed at their child's needs, but more at how their child is expressing this. So it often results in conflict, misunderstanding and resentment from both sides.

And then comes the time later on when their parents claim they want their children to be self-empowered and to value their needs and wants again. But what I sense the parents and teachers are really asking for, is to find a way that everyone can express what is important to them in a respectful way that contributes to finding a solution that works for everyone. Now this is powerful. This creates an environment where it is no longer "my needs at the cost of yours". It now opens up the possibility of "my needs *and* yours". This is the real 'Nurturing of Self-Esteem.' And this can, and will, be the result of learning really effective communication and relationship skills.

So coming from a space of deep wisdom, my answer is "yes", I want my child to have a high self-esteem. I acknowledge that this means possible challenging times that will be rewarded by deep connections and a sense of meaning and worthiness. And coming from just a space of good intentions, my answer is still "yes". Even if I don't know what I may be in for, or how to do it, this is something I stand for and take on as it is a belief that I value and want to express. This now includes the nurturing of my own self-esteem. 

