

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Gift of Self-Esteem

It was a pretty ordinary moment. My daughters and I were enjoying a snack of fresh oranges. I noticed Emmy cut hers into two horizontal sections—like a grapefruit—instead of several vertical segments as I always did. She was enjoying that orange to the max, nibbling it around the edges, slurping from the center, squeezing the juice into her mouth.

I could have berated her for not eating it the “right” way (i.e., “my way”), or pointed out how it was easier for juice to drip on her the way she was eating it, or I could have just ignored it altogether. All of these responses were part of my old low-road parenting repertoire.

Instead, I took genuine delight in her creative attack on that orange. I told her I thought she had a really interesting idea. I asked her where she’d learned to cut it like that and would she show me how to do it too? I loved watching her

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eyes light up and her self-esteem ratchet up another notch. I'd noticed what she'd done. I asked her questions. I'd acknowledged her creativity. I wanted to learn from her!

Could the possibility of a little dribble of orange juice on her shirt ever compare with the gift of enhanced self-esteem? My reaction to that ordinary event determined which way Emmy would see the moment and either gain from it or have a little more value chipped from her soul.

If I could give my child no other gift in the world, my top choice would be self-esteem. Without it, we wither. With it, we thrive.

Unfortunately, self-esteem doesn't come programmed in our genes, we can't add any kind of magic elixir to our babies' formula to start it growing. No matter how many of our children's teachers or friends—or eventually, therapists—acknowledge their value, our children's real sense of self-worth initially comes from us, their parents.

Every moment of our lives augments or diminishes our self-esteem: the responses we get from others, our interactions with others, how we learned to treat ourselves from watching our parents.

When you have high self-esteem you are nearly invincible. No matter what happens, you still

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who lack the gift of self-esteem.
They're the bullies on the playground,
the underachievers in school,
the kids who get taken advantage of.
They are our high-school dropouts,
the kids who can't say no to deadly drugs
or inappropriate sex
or a ride with a drunken driver
or an invitation to join a gang."

"When you give love messages, you're boosting
your child's self-worth.
When you focus on their strengths
rather than on their weaknesses,
their self-esteem can only rise

tion, and how you see others to the very essence that people perceive as you.

As I work with both big and small companies on leadership development and training, it's often easy to see that the problems keeping these businesses from success are not obstacles imposed by "The Company." You know the usual complaints you hear from employees and bosses alike: This company is so rigid. . . . This company doesn't appreciate every

. These employees just don't want to work hard, the ethic is dead. . . . The people here are so petty and jealous. This company discriminates against (pick one) women, men, minorities, young people, old people, people with children, etc. "Companies" can't do anything to anybody, but people sure inevitably I find that the success of any business is in direct proportion to the kind of qualities and values and principles an employee holds and the culture the company creates to support those qualities. Not only will healthy doses of self-esteem create a successful family, but you're also practically ensuring your child will become a valued employee, no matter what she decides to do.

I'm very proud of my children, says Debbie. You always get what you expect. If you say your child's dumb or won't succeed, that's what you'll get. I have always tried to tell my children they're wonderful, that I'm very proud of them, that they can succeed at whatever they want.

For example, my son Joe has always been a born leader. He has a quiet confidence that is quite infectious. One day, a strange woman came up to me and asked, "Are you Joe's mother? I want you to know that Joe is the most special, wonderful person and I just wanted to meet his mother."

oe may have been a "born leader," but it was definitely up to his parents to foster and nourish that quality appropriately or

those leadership skills might have been used to bully or lead other kids into trouble.

Just think about when your children are exposed to other kids who may steal or drink or use drugs. When you know your children have strong self-esteem you don't have to worry about how to control their contact with others. You can't really control it anyway. But you can remind your children of how wonderful

they are and how lucky those other kids will be when your child's values rub off on them.

When picking her daughter up at school every day Marcia always asked Abby, "How did your day go? What's the best thing that happened to you today?"

"I knew we had made great strides one day when she was in second grade when she said, 'The teacher gave me a sticker today. But you know what, Mommy, it doesn't matter if she gave me a sticker or not because I know I did a good job.'"

"So much reinforcement in grade school is external, like stickers," Marcia explained. "But I want my child to have validation within herself. She connected that day and found her own validation even before the teacher gave her a sticker. She was responsible for her own 'feel good.'"

I know from my own life how important internal self-validation can be. When I was flying high with my talent agency, nothing could go wrong. I was strong, I was powerful, I was important. The day I lost that company I lost myself as well. I thought I was the company and my self-worth could only be as good as the business was. I could only function as long as other people admired me and flattered me. When left to do that on my own, I had no reserves to draw from.

It's so easy to pick out the children who lack the gift of self-esteem. They're the bullies on the playground, the under-

achievers in school, the kids who get taken advantage of. They are our high-school dropouts, the kids who can't say no to deadly drugs or inappropriate sex or a ride with a drunken driver or an invitation to join a gang. They're the grown-ups who miss out on career opportunities, who think they're not good enough, who have to belittle others to make themselves feel important, the ones who are always looking for other people's "spots." They're the parents who can't acknowledge their own or their children's greatness, thus perpetuating the cycle for generations.

...we talked about in the Lis-
chapter? She's the woman who was ignored by a
ose sense of self died when her husband did.

gh Deanna has made vast strides in personal growth
ng her own damaged self-esteem, her first two chil-
ginning to act out their own low self-esteem by skip-
l and by not taking care of themselves. The pain in
er children and grandchild suffer the effects of low
is intense.

le of pain and dysfunction is continuing for her as it
many families unless they can break their old habits.
how each of the five tools we looked at in the earlier

and new way of using it? The old way
the new way not only gets the job done
h valuable qualities to shape his or her
s greatly enhances self-esteem.

en, when you catch a feeling, you vali-
r her own sense of reality. When you
eem, your child sees how your life is
nd control you have to make your own
e love messages, you're boosting the
a you focus on their strengths rather

world of their own creativity and talent and abilities they might otherwise never have discovered or acknowledged.

A powerful sign in a hospital I visited one day said: "AIDS: 100 percent deadly, 100 percent preventable." Kids with high self-esteem know how to say "No" to dangerous situations; kids with low self-esteem look to anyone else to decide what's right for them. Or they don't see themselves as worthy of self-care. Which child would you like to have in these times when our

children are constantly exposed to drugs, gangs, sexually trans-
mitted diseases, and alcohol abuse?

More than any other gift, parents have told us they want their children to have the ability to make responsible decisions. Teachers tell us over and over again that they wish more than anything that children had more of this quality. They know from everyday experience with hundreds of different children how vital self-esteem is to peak performance, to learning, to setting and achieving goals.

This point was driven home forcibly during an outbreak of gang activity in Denver this year. Eric Poole, a criminal justice professor who had studied kids from the toughest neighbor-

hoods, found some interesting conclusions. In those neighbor-
hoods, whether a child joined a gang had almost nothing to do
with the size of his family, the number of parents at home, their
education or income. Rather, it had to do with whether the child
had anyone in his life who would be disappointed if he joined a
gang.

Poole also found that it took much greater character to resist
a gang's influences than to succumb to them. Those who do re-
sist seem to have a much stronger sense of who they are.

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ing instead of taking, strength rather than weakness. You see abundance and opportunity instead of shortage and trouble.

What a magnificent gift!

"Whether you believe you can or you can't,
you're right!"

—Henry Ford

"When I saw a baby bird on the ground,
I wanted to save it.
I tried hard, but it died anyway
and it made me cry."

"One time when my mom was real sick,
I rubbed her back, brought her juice,
and told her I loved her.
Is that what you mean by compassion?
I mean, that's a long word!"

—Rusty Borneman, age 8