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Lesson 5: Self-Esteem and Children

Self-esteem is defined as feeling oneself worthy of the respect of others. All human beings have an innate desire to be respected and liked. They want others to look up to them. There is great wealth in self-esteem. It brings confidence in one's own abilities, and helps in initiating and achieving one's goals. Feeling good about oneself brings peace and happiness to the heart. It boosts the spirit and produces noble characters and lofty ideas.

Self-esteem is different from vanity. When a person has some good qualities and/or abilities, to know that and be thankful for it, is self-esteem. To be proud about it, and to think oneself to be better than others is vanity. There is a fine line between the two, but a basic difference is the understanding that all that is good in one-self comes from Allah. That eliminates all feelings of pride and leaves only gratitude for it, and the desire to be able to use it in the best way.

From a very young age, children show a desire for respect and attention. They show off in order to get praise. Sometimes when attention is not forthcoming, they revert to negative behavior such as fighting and screaming in order to get attention. There are various views on the origins of this desire for respect.

Some psychologists believe it stems from a natural desire for success over others. Others say it comes from a love of self, an egoism inherent in all human beings. Religious scholars believe that within the human resides a Divine spirit. Almighty Allah says in the Qur'an:

So when I have made him complete, and breathed into him of My spirit fall down into prostration to him (15:29).

This Divine spirit, with its greatness and nobility, propels the human being towards dignity and respect. He needs to be valued, and would not naturally put himself in a derogatory or lowly position. The Creator Himself has respected the human being when He says:

And indeed We have honored the son of Adam. (17:70)

Thus the human being has the expectation that others will also respect him in this world. Whatever be

the origin of the desire for respect, all scholars believe that a healthy self-esteem is a vital ingredient for the progress and success of the human being. The roots of this important quality are often built, or destroyed, in childhood.

Advantages of a Healthy Self-Esteem

1. The child who knows that he has some good qualities that others respect is satisfied with himself. This will translate into rational and calm behavior. There will be no need for tantrums and aggressiveness to demand attention. A child with self-esteem is a happy child.
2. Such a child values himself, and knows that he has a certain respect and dignity. Thus there will be lesser chances for him to become involved in acts which lower the status he envisions for himself. A child who respects himself will not easily give in to peer pressure to perform immoral and indecent acts. He would realize that it is beneath himself to stoop to it.
3. A child with self-esteem will try harder to achieve high goals. He knows he is capable of good, and can set lofty targets to achieve. He will have the initiative to start things and get involved in various activities.

When Self-Esteem is Lacking

1. The child gives in to wrong more easily. He is easily swayed by others as it is difficult to be firm on one's own principles when there is no confidence in oneself. The views and opinions of others will carry great weight. Such children run a higher risk of succumbing to peer pressure and joining unseemly groups.
2. A child who has no self-esteem accepts failure as his lot. He will not try to challenge himself, or have high expectations of himself. He does not think he has the ability to achieve anything good. This resignation to failure sets ground for future defeats, and the lack of struggle to progress in life.
3. He suffers more from negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, frustration etc. A child who has confidence in himself, can accept another child's success as he knows that he too is successful. But when that consolation is absent, jealousy is a natural reaction. Often there is anger at oneself, or even at others who may be seen as responsible for the failures. There is then little room for happy, healthy feelings necessary to make the child an emotionally stable human being.

How to foster self-esteem in a child

Having seen the importance of self-esteem in the life of a child, many people wonder what can be done to ensure that a child has a healthy sense of self-esteem. There is much that parents can do, or avoid doing, that will help the child to respect himself. The following points are not meant to raise the child on a

pedestal, and turn him into a proud, selfish brat.

When doled out in moderation, these tactics will help foster a feeling a sense of self-worth. All parents should use discretion in their individually unique circumstances to avoid over indulging and spoiling the child. These points are given only as guidance.

Show respect to the child

Many parents do not feel it necessary to respect the child. They expect respect, but believe that respecting the child will amount to spoiling him. However respect for the child in the following ways will help the child feel good about himself, as well as respect the parent more willingly:

a) Talk to the child in a normal voice or tone. Don't belittle the child by talking in a childish voice. Talk to him constantly, not only when you want to scold him or tell him to do something. Talk about everyday affairs; school, work, political issues, stories from your past, etc. etc.

Some parents believe that because children do not understand at the level of adults, there is not much use in talking to them. But children who are talked to more often become more understanding and insightful than those who are not. These children feel a sense of communication with the parents, and know that their parents deem them worthy of a conversation. It is a great boost in confidence.

b) When scolding the child, do not totally destroy his feeling of self-worth. Reprove him for a particular action rather than a general "you are good for nothing" attitude which, if dealt out constantly, will lead the child to actually believe it. As quick as parents are to point out a wrong act, they should remember there are good qualities also present in the child.

c) Listen to his ideas and opinions. When the child wishes to say what he thinks of something, encourage him to talk. Don't ridicule or put him down. A child will not have the wisdom of an adult but deserves to be listened to so that he will be forthcoming in his views in future. Dismissing a child's opinions as unworthy is a perfect way to suppress any thoughtfulness or creativity in the child.

d) Sometimes speak positively about him to others. When a child hears himself being talked about positively, he feels that it is a sincere appreciation. It need not be long praises, or undeserved praise. But when the child does something good, mention it to a relative, or a friend, etc. This will seem more genuine and have more effect than a word of praise to the child himself. Parents who criticize and complain about the child to others, in front of the child, often ruin any feeling of self-worth the child may have. Sometimes parents and relatives act as if the child cannot hear. They discuss him in his presence, comparing him to others and mentioning the bad qualities he has. This has a very negative effect on the child.

Teach the child to think highly of himself

Encourage him to set goals and have high expectations of himself. In school and Madrasah and any other activities he may be involved in, help him to do well and to achieve the utmost possible with his capabilities. A push of encouragement from the parent, as well as concerned interest, helps the child try hard in his daily activities.

Teach him that certain things are below his dignity. These could include complaining too much, asking for things from others, getting into trouble with authority etc. The child will become habituated to a certain type of behavior. Anything below that will seem unworthy for himself.

Make him familiar with stories of great people

Children love stories, and these are a great medium for imparting valuable lessons. When the children are young and rely on parents to read to them, use the opportunity to read inspiring stories of great people. Many Islamic books for children are available these days, and Muslim parents should make good use of them. Even when reading secular stories, search your local libraries for stories that will inspire the child towards good virtues. Heroes and their heroic actions are often imprinted in the minds of the child, and this will do more to push him towards noble behavior than a lecture from the parents. Manipulate the interest in stories to gain a sense of respect and dignity for noble behavior.

Listen to the child's wishes

Sometimes a child is opposed to what the parent wishes him to do. This could be as simple as an enforcement of bedtime, wearing of appropriate clothes, or going for a particular outing, etc. The child may have a different view as to what should be done. A good parent would listen to what the child has to say. This does not mean that the parent gives in to the child, or lets him do as he wishes. It just means that the parent respects the child's opinions although not necessarily following it. The child will eventually do as the parent wishes, but will feel that he was listened to.

Practical Do's & Don'ts for fostering self-esteem

Do give your child responsibility at home. Give him basic duties and chores, according to his age, to do around the house. It is important that the child feels he is part of the household and is needed for the daily work that goes into running the home.

Do talk to him about major changes or decisions being made for the family. If a new house is being bought, or a job is being changed, let the child know about it. Often parents leave the child completely out of important decisions being made.

Do teach him not to accept undue praise or flattery. The child likes to be praised but should only accept it when deserved.

Don't interfere in everything your child does. The child needs some space for healthy independence and originality. If he wishes to arrange his things in a particular way, for example, or plans something for himself, let him do it so long as it is not wrong in any serious way. Some parents expect children will do everything exactly as they wish, and fuss over every small detail in the child's life. Such a child grows up to feel he cannot make any decisions for himself.

Don't pamper the child too much when he is sick, or hurt. The child should be taught to be strong and bear a little pain. If allowed to whine and cry a great deal, the child may learn to be a complainer and will be unable to bear difficulties.

Don't ignore the child when you have company. When a family has guests, Islamic etiquette demands that the host pay great respect to the guests. This does not mean however, that children should be ignored and brushed aside. Instead the parent should encourage the child to be part of the gathering, and involve him with the guests.

Wise Words

1. Allah has decreed everything for a believer, except that he humiliates himself.

Holy Prophet (S)

A lesson from the Life of the Prophet

One day the Prophet was sitting with his companions when he saw a young child in the group. Having a great love for children, he called him and sat him on his lap. The people around him watched as the Prophet (S) gave his attention to the child. Suddenly the boy, over-awed perhaps, urinated on the lap of the Prophet(S).

Embarrassed, the father sprang forward. "What have you done, you silly boy" he shouted. His arm shoved forward to grab the child away from the Prophet(S), his red face showing his anger. Fear and confusion showed in the face of the child. The Prophet(S) restrained the man, and gently hugged the child to him. "Don't worry," he told the over-zealous father. "This is not a big issue. My clothes can be washed. But be careful with how you treat the child" he continued. "What can restore his self-esteem after you have dealt with him in public like this?"

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