

# Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

## Building Self-Esteem In Your Family

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### I. Biblical References

#### Col 3:12-15

Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful. (NLT)

#### Phil 4:8

Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (NLT)

### II. Introduction: The Basis Of Self-Esteem

It's almost impossible these days to be involved in any aspect of work in the field of psychology, without encountering the topic of self-esteem. It's reasonable to say that a large part of the field of psych is aimed toward the self-esteem issue. Yet it's not uncommon in today's religious world to hear pastors and religious teachers speak disparagingly about self-esteem. Some of these religious types are quick to point out that self-esteem is a humanistic construction, and within God's evaluation of humans the primary criteria for any sense of personal value has to do with one's relationship with God. Some religious folks add the epithet, "And to heck with psychology."

This chapter is written to address the issue of enhancing the self-esteem of those we love ~ our family members. Insights will be presented from the fields of both psychology and faith. There is no formula which if used will instantly build self-esteem in anyone. Self-esteem is something that is built slowly. It is much more a product of family systems in which respect and love are part of each relationship, than it is a product of psychological techniques aimed at generating self-esteem.

What exactly is self-esteem, and from where does it come? Simply defined, *self-esteem is the opinion we carry regarding our personal value or sense of worth*. A person who is comfortable with who they are, and believes they are well-accepted by others, is more prone to measure higher levels of self esteem than a person who is not comfortable with who they are and believes that others do not carry a very high opinion of them.

The dominant stage when one's self-esteem is formed is during early- to mid-childhood. The primary source of self-esteem is one's primary care-givers ~ usually mom and dad. During the years from birth through perhaps ten, there is generally nobody more influential in a person's life than one's parents. And it is their opinion that is usually the primary source of a child's sense of self worth.

If the child's parents encourage and support the child, establish reasonable boundaries, form realistic objectives, provide a positive climate within which the child can thrive, and then praise the child for his/her successes, that child is likely to develop a secure sense of his/her value. By contrast, if mom and dad are harsh, critical, emotionally removed, etc., a child's sense of self is likely to be damaged.

There are too many things to list that can harm a child's sense of self-respect and worth. However, in order to give the reader a feel for the issues, here are a few examples:

- Parents harshly critical or demanding
- Parents raising the performance bar well beyond the child's ability to reach
- Parents cruel in their punishment
- Parents absent from the child's life
  - A father that travels five days a week every week of almost every month
  - A mother whose career takes her away from the family
  - A parent suffering from mental illness and therefore unable to parent
  - Death of a parent
  - Divorce of parents
  - Parent who is very emotionally distant, even if physically present
- Parental alcoholism or other substance abuse
- Body image issues
  - A child who believes they're too tall, short, fat, skinny, etc.
  - Physical deformities or unusual limitations
- Abuse of any kind (mental, physical, sexual)
- A child's perceived inadequacies in academics, sports, or social ability
- "Sibling-inferiority," as when an older brother or sister excels and is highly valued at the expense of the younger child's significance or value

Actually, the list is endless, and virtually nobody gets through childhood with zero emotional scars. Yet oddly, even the most disadvantaged child can come through terribly difficult times feeling very good about himself/herself. Helen Keller did it. Conversely, even the most blessed, advantaged, gifted child can come through childhood feeling terrible about himself/herself. This is because much of the child's sense of self comes through the child's assessment of the parents' assessment. That may sound redundant. It is how the child feels about, and believes about, the

parents' assessment that counts. Parents may believe they're being positive and encouraging, but if a child experiences the....