

Self-Esteem in our Children: A Christian Theological Perspective for Parents and Educators

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There are few topics more popular in social science research historically than the topic of self-esteem (Orth & Robins, 2022; Zeigler-Hill, 2013; Donnellan et al, 2011), and few topics in psychology that are, seemingly, more in direct opposition to a Christian worldview than self-esteem. Christian parents interested in raising children of faith can find themselves in a dilemma navigating the conflicting messages on how to raise children who are, both, humble Christians and have high self-esteem.

Understanding Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is usually defined as a person's subjective sense of one's value or worth - how a person feels about oneself (Orth & Robins, 2014). Does a person understand and see oneself as good, secure in one's value, or does a person feel or believe that one is bad, incapable, or worthless? Self-esteem is closely related to things like self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-respect and is distinct in the literature from self-image, self-efficacy, and self-confidence (Burton, 2015).

Self-esteem is more than just our self-concept, how we understand ourselves (O'Mara, et al, 2006), or even self-identity, how we identify ourselves. Self-esteem is evaluative-how we feel about ourselves (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Do we like ourselves? Does a person feel like s/he is good enough (Orth & Robins, 2014)? "...a general satisfaction

and happiness with what one is, does, and has.” (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2013, p. 124). Self-esteem is understood to be on a continuum from low to high and is subjective. “High self-esteem is measured as a willingness to rate the self favorably.” (Krueger, et al, 2022, p. 18)

Historically, in social science research, measuring a person’s self-esteem was as simple as asking 10 questions, related to how much a person agrees with statements, such as, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself,” and, “I can do things as well as most other people,” (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013; Rosenberg, 1985). Over time, as research advanced, there have been numerous developments in the definition and types or categories of self-esteem, adding qualifications or dimensions to this concept such as: Explicit versus implicit self-esteem (e.g., Pietschnig, et al. 2018), stable versus unstable (e.g., Kernis, 2005), secure versus insecure/fragile (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013), trait versus state self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), global versus domain-specific self-esteem (e.g., Tuijl, et al., 2018; Dapp et al., 2023; Donnelan et al, 2011), contingent (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013), authentic or genuine self-esteem (e.g., Orth et al., 2016).

The literature is too expansive to adequately summarize it in this article (see Orth & Robins, 2022; Zeigler-Hill, 2013 for good summaries of research). However, “empirical research reveals that a wide range of desirable life outcomes, including mental health and happiness, quality of personal relationships, and success and achievement, are associated with high levels of self-esteem.” (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2013, p 125)

Just to highlight, research shows that, compared to children with low self-esteem, children who have good self-esteem have better relationships (e.g., Harris & Orth, 2020; Cameron & Granger, 2019), more social acceptance (Orth & Robins, 2022), are more emotionally stable and less prone to psychological distress (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), have more social support and are more healthy and physically active (Orth & Robins, 2022), have better self-control, self-regulation, and

make better choices (Baumeister, et al, 2018, Orth & Robins, 2022), manage better in the face of adversity (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), are more persistent after failures (Orth & Robins, 2022), and “more engaged and persistent in achievement contexts,” (Orth & Robins, 2022, p 8), do better academically (Zeigler-Hill, 2013, Orth & Robins, 2022), and do better in life. People with high self-esteem tend to seek and get jobs with more responsibility, autonomy, and influence and are more satisfied and successful in their jobs than those with low self-esteem (summarized in Orth & Robins, 2022).

These are clearly good, positive things that any parent would want for their children.

And research shows that children with poor self-esteem, who believe they are worthless, bad, or unlovable, have less satisfying relationships (Cameron, et al, 2013), are reluctant to risk failure or rejection (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), more likely to anticipate rejection in relationships (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), react more strongly after rejection (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), experience mental health problems, and are less likely to get a college degree (see summary in Orth & Robins, 2022). Low self-esteem predicts school dropout (Orth & Robins, 2022). It is associated with higher body mass, cardiovascular problems, smoking, and negative consequences of alcohol consumption (Zeigler, 2013), higher levels of depression and anxiety (Orth & Robins, 2022), use of illegal substances, delinquent behavior, sexual offenses, violence (Zeigler-Hill, 2013), and anti-social behavior (Orth & Robins, 2022). Low self-esteem is included as either a diagnostic criterion or an associated feature for several mental health disorders (Zeigler-Hill, 2011).

In our contemporary culture, “high self-esteem is a virtue, a badge of honor; and low self-esteem is a flaw, a mark of shame.” (Zeigler-Hill, 2013, p 156)

There is no real debate that high self-esteem is associated with many positive life outcomes and low self-esteem is associated with many negative life outcomes. However, there is a notable discussion on

what, exactly, self-esteem is, how it is measured, and if you can raise a person's self-esteem (See Zeigler-Hill, 2013 for review). It is an open question if self-esteem causes these documented positive life outcomes or is a result of these positive outcomes (Dapp, Krauss, & Orth, 2023) or even if a person's self-esteem is a result or reflection of other processes (Kernis, 2005). For our purposes, what can parents learn about how to raise children with high self-esteem?

Guidance for Building Self-Esteem

With the established associations between good self-esteem and so many positive life outcomes, efforts to “raise” people's self-esteem, or build up a child's self-esteem are understandable. Yet much of the historical guidance for parents from secular professionals on how to raise kids with healthy self-esteem does not seem to work. Giving every child a trophy, congratulating kids for little things they should be doing anyway, telling kids how great they are, or praising them, do not lead to good outcomes (Brummelman, 2022). “Although we now have relatively strong evidence that self-esteem influences life outcomes, the evidence on the causes of self-esteem is still limited.” (Orth & Robins, 2014 p. 12)

Self-Esteem and Christian Faith

From a Christian perspective, teaching children to think about how great they are, seems to fuel pride more than encourage the Christian virtues of selflessness, humility, and meekness.

The conflict, or contradiction, for Christian parents, is that the psychological definition of self-esteem seems to go against Christian values and virtues. Thinking highly of yourself, trusting yourself, valuing yourself, believing in yourself, or even loving yourself, do not seem to be Christian virtues, but they seem to be good self-esteem. The Scriptures speak about virtues that seem to be the opposite of high self-esteem such as meekness (Matthew 5:5), poverty of spirit (Matthew 5:3), and humility (Colossians 3:12, Ephesians 4:2, James 4:10, I Peter 5:5).

The scriptures seem to speak directly against self-esteem and many of the self-esteem-building techniques: we're not supposed to praise ourselves or remind ourselves how good we are; we're warned against being puffed up with pride (Romans 11:21); we're supposed to consider others as greater than ourselves (Philippians 2:3); we are to consider ourselves as the chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). Suggestions like, "accept yourself," "love yourself," "forgive yourself," or "believe in yourself," sound positive, but seem to have that same self-centeredness that contradicts the Gospel message.

In the Eastern Christian Patristic literature, self-esteem seems to be bad, closely related to pride and vainglory. The Fathers advise the exact opposite of praising ourselves or reminding ourselves how good we are. We read things like a person should "...always reject the thoughts of self-praise that enter his heart, and always regard himself as nothing before God. In this way he will be freed, with god's help, from the demon of self-esteem." (St. John Cassian, 1984. P. 92).

"You need to extirpate [self-esteem] from yourself by all means—it is the cause of all our evil and vices. Worldly people still regard it as a virtue and as nobility, as this is out of ignorance or from darkening by the passions; while we have to oppose it in everything by humility and selflessness." (St. Ambrose of Optina, 2004 p 230).

We even hear that praising oneself can be the reason we fall into sin. "Guard your mind from self-praise and flee a high opinion of yourself, so that God does not allow you to fall into the opposite [passion to the virtue for which you boast] for man does not accomplish virtue alone, but with the help of God who sees all." (St Mark the Ascetic, Homilies. p 85).

On the surface, it seems pretty clear. A good Christian avoids self-esteem. And a good psychologist avoids these Christian teachings. So, what does this mean for Christian parents? We want to raise kids who are able to thrive in difficult situations, take appropriate challenges,

know they are valuable, and do it all while being humble and meek.

Understanding True Self-Esteem

It seems as though the secular research is describing that a solid and positive sense of self, a clear and deeply embedded sense that one is good, valued, loved, and capable is an important aspect of thriving as a human being. If we look closely, we see that self-esteem is not so much a personal quality, but a relational quality. It has to do with our personal experience of being valued by someone, being loved by someone. It is an internal experience of being close to someone who knows us, takes an interest in us, respects us, and loves us. It is the experience of a relationship with someone who “has our back,” who has our best interest in mind, win or lose, succeed, or fail. More than someone who praises us, it is someone who knows our faults but sticks by us nonetheless.

When we are raised with someone like that in our lives, we are less concerned about what others think about us, particularly when we fail or experience rejection. We are better able to take on challenges, hold up under stress, persevere through struggles, and learn from mistakes. When we have a deep sense that someone is by our side, we are less afraid of failing, better able to take constructive criticism, resist peer pressure, stand up for what is right, and have healthy relationships. As Christian parents, we want our kids to be able to do all those things. With this understanding, we can say that “self-esteem” or self-worth is the natural result of a secure attachment with a primary care provider.

If we look a little closer at the Orthodox Christian tradition, we will notice, in fact, that the saints and the fathers and mothers of the Church all had a deep sense that they were known, valued, and loved...by God. They professed how much, and how deeply, God valued and loved them even as they attested to their own, “worthlessness.” Their “self-esteem,” was not found in their praise of themselves, but in their relationship with God. They did not think they were great, but that God is great and He loves them. They understand

themselves to be created in the image and likeness of God, as Christ-bearers, icons of Christ. That might be called true self-esteem. It is not so much that we are great, as humans, but that God is great and He is in us. He knows us, and He loves us. The saints recognize that while we were yet sinners, God loved us, (Romans 5:8) and they respond with the confidence and security that comes from being created in God's image and deeply known and loved by God. Their esteem was not built on what they thought about themselves but on their experience of what God thinks about them. It is more accurate to call this God-esteem or Christ-esteem that they carried deeply within themselves.

The saints, simultaneously, know themselves to be just earthen vessels and confess that they carry within themselves a treasure, Christ Himself. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." (2 Corinthians 4:7)

From a Christian perspective, we might say that to thrive as a human being requires this deep, internal sense of being known and loved by someone perfectly and completely, having someone who is on our side no matter what we do, and that someone is God. It's not so much that secular psychologists are wrong with what they are observing, but, rather, they are inaccurate, or incomplete, in their explanation of what they are observing. Theologically speaking, "self-esteem" is an epiphenomenon. It cannot be developed or built directly. Rather, is the natural result of being deeply known and loved.

It is always within the saints' relationship with God, their deep awareness and experience of God's love for them, that they could see how much they need God's mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. God's deep love for them is the context for their repentance and the foundation of their "self-esteem." And the saints respond to God's love by walking in complete obedience to Him as an act of love for Him. Obedience is our response to a God who loves us first.

Essentially, having someone who loves us no matter what nurtures good “self-esteem.” For followers of Christ, that person is God, Himself. We were created to be loved like this by God. And when we live in that reality and love out of that reality, responding to God through obedience, we acquire God’s characteristics like humility, meekness, patience, longsuffering, selflessness, and love. In fact, the research shows that a person with healthy “self-esteem” is less susceptible to what are, in fact, the passions of pride or vainglory (Jordan and Zeigler-Hill, 2013). The more solid a sense we have of being known and loved, the less we experience rejection, struggles, or setbacks as an ego threat. We are less preoccupied with ourselves at all.

“The common thread connecting fragile self-esteem and narcissism appears to be a preoccupation with self-image.” (Jordan and Zeigler-Hill, 2013, p. 90). It seems as though the opposite of low self-esteem, comparing oneself unfavorably to others, is not high self-esteem, comparing oneself favorably to others, but not comparing oneself at all to others. It is not having the “ego involved in everyday activities.” (Kernis, 2005, p10). “Somewhat ironically, the most effective way to cultivate healthy self-esteem may be to worry less about having high self-esteem.” (Jordan and Zeigler-Hill, 2013, p 91)

When we have a real and deep sense that we are known and loved we don’t need to be preoccupied by how external events may or may not define our worth or value. We do not need to promote ourselves or put others down to make ourselves look or feel good. A solid sense of being known and loved by God frees us up to persevere through challenges and setbacks, pray for those who insult us, and forgive those who hurt us.

Implications for parents, parent educators, and pastors

As parents, pastors, and care providers, we need to recognize that a child’s self-esteem is the natural byproduct of our relationships with our children. The more a child knows that he is respected, that someone is on his side, cares for him, and takes an interest in him, no

matter what, the better he does in life. It's easy to slip into the thinking that parenting is about getting kids to behave the right way or act like Christians. Parenting is more about loving our kids in the right way, giving them an experience of Christian love in the home, rather than getting them to behave the right way. Our children form their ideas about themselves, and their "self-esteem," from their relationships with us.

Walk alongside your child through life

Parents do not need to praise children to build self-esteem or criticize them to build. They simply need to take an interest in the child, respect the child, set appropriate limits to the child, and love their child and they will naturally develop a healthy sense of themselves and humility. Parents just need to walk with them closely through life's struggles, failures, and successes. It doesn't help them always to get a trophy. What helps them is to have parents who celebrate with them when they earn a trophy and weep with them when they don't. Walking closely alongside our children through life instills in our children a deep sense that someone is on their side, cares about them, and values them no matter what.

Children don't need to think they are great; they need to know that someone is taking an interest in them and cares for them when they succeed as much as when they fail. They don't need to be protected from failure to feel good about themselves; they need to be prepared for failure with parents who don't react when they make mistakes but walk with them as they learn from mistakes. Only then will they learn that successes or failures do not define them. In this way, they learn how to take appropriate risks and challenges and naturally develop a sense of their God-given abilities and strengths.

Learn to set clear, firm, and consistent limits.

Children don't need to be pampered or have their desires indulged to feel cared for and respected. Rather, they need parents who love them enough to set clear limits to their desires and impulses in firm and

respectful ways. When this is done respectfully, our children feel respected and cared for. Setting clear and firm limits respectfully is as an act of love and respect.

Learn to listen to your kids, all the time, and when you are setting limits.

Feeling loved has more to do with feeling known, heard, respected, and cared for, rather than praised or indulged. We communicate this to our children by taking an interest in who they are and listening to what they are thinking and feeling as we set limits to their misbehaviors, give consequences respectfully, and force them to do things they don't want to do like clean their room, pick up their toys, or go to Church. Parents can learn to listen to their children and teach children to name their feelings when they struggle, fail, or succeed, which nurtures emotional intimacy and closeness.

Healthy self-esteem and healthy humility are the natural result of a relationship of respect and love that reflects the love that God has for each of us. God does not praise us, indulge our desires, make our lives easy, or protect us from life's struggles but joins us in the struggle by taking on our human nature and offering Himself completely on the cross. And He continues to draw close to us and comfort us in our daily struggles through the Holy Spirit as we grow and develop in holiness.

Connect your home to the church and the church to your home

When our love for our children reflects the true nature of God's love for them and when we live our home life connected to the sacramental and ascetic life of the Church, our children hear in Church what they see in their parents and are experiencing in their hearts in the home. They learn that God is the only one who is great and worthy of praise and he values each of us enough to give His life for us, independent of anything we do. Children learn that we don't need to earn God's love by good behavior, but we return His love by obeying His commandments.

When the love of parents in the home is connected with the love of God encountered in the church, children internalize a sense that they have someone who is always on their side, and that person is God. When parents model this love and children experience this love in the home connected to the Church, this essentially points a child to the eternal transcendent Source of love. As a child grows she can navigate the transition from the incomplete love of her parents toward the eternal love of God.

Children will, naturally, develop a solid sense of themselves, as icons of Christ, if they are treated like icons of Christ in a home intimately connected to the Church. When our homes are filled with love, prayer, and repentance, closely connected to the life of the Church, we foster the work of divine grace in our children (Sr. Magdalen, 1997), which forms real self-esteem in our children.

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