

Rejuvenate Your Child's Self-Esteem

By Dr. Raymond J. Huntington

For many Washington-area students, the December holidays offer at least two weeks to relax and recharge while classes are out of session. For families, this can also be a wonderful time to reaffirm emotional connections that have a significant impact on children's success in school. Recognizing the very powerful link between high self-esteem, high aspirations and high achievement, parents should consider the following checklist of strategies to help students develop a positive mindset for the semester to come.

Help your children set goals.

Children feel successful when they accomplish goals – particularly those that lead to success in school. Work with your child to determine learning and achievement goals that are attainable with a reasonable amount of time and effort. Once these goals are set, determine what steps should be taken to reach them. Praise every earnest attempt, whether it's successful or not.

Encourage children to communicate their feelings.

Children need to know that even anger and fear are normal emotions felt by everyone from time to time. They should understand that acknowledging these feelings can often be the first step to overcoming them. If your daughter realizes that she's angry over the unflattering comments in a mid-year progress report, she may commit herself to working harder. If your son admits that he's afraid that he's just not up for the challenges of another semester of Algebra II, that admission could trigger the determination to get extra help.

Listen carefully to your child.

When you listen to children, they tend to feel better about themselves. They also tend to model that behavior by listening closer to their siblings, their teachers, other children, and to you. Children who are good listeners

often find it easier to make friends, and to feel valued at school and in their communities. And don't forget that being a good listener is vital for success in the classroom as well.

Use fair, consistent discipline as a building block for self-esteem.

Discipline should be a tool for helping children make wise decisions. You can utilize it best by establishing a limited number of clear and necessary rules. Too many rules can make a child feel powerless and untrustworthy. But rules that have a definitive connection to success – completing homework every night or putting in extra study time before a big test, for example – will lead to accomplishments that automatically make your child feel better about his or her abilities.

Help children learn from their mistakes.

When children are unsuccessful at something, position it as a temporary setback, not a failure, as long as they learn from the experience. Ask your child for a sense of why he or she didn't succeed, and work together to determine what steps should be taken to improve.

Give your children meaningful responsibilities.

Giving your children worthwhile jobs around the house and responsibilities for improving your community can enhance their sense of accomplishment. As children live up to these responsibilities, they develop a sense of self-worth at being able to contribute their skills and energies in a meaningful way. Students who feel valued at home and in the community tend to feel a stronger connection to their schools as well.

Give children a special place for displaying educational accomplishments.

The refrigerator door is ideal. When friends and relatives visit,



share the special items and let your child feel successful. You can also keep a scrapbook of your children's accomplishments.

Recognize your child's special qualities.

While all children tend to seek the approval of their peers, "popularity" can seem especially crucial during the middle and high school years. But your child doesn't have to be the star of the cheerleading squad or the class president to stand out. Make sure you recognize your child's special qualities, and do whatever you can to foster higher achievement by nurturing special aptitudes. Remind your child often that there is indeed "life after high school," and plenty of time to shine under the spotlight of individual abilities in the years to come.

Remember the power of praise.

Most of us can easily remember the thrill of rushing home with an "A" on a term paper or high marks on a report card or class project, so don't forget to rise to the occasion when you hear "Mom, guess what!" seconds after your son or daughter comes through the door. And while it's pretty typical for teens to pretend they're too cool to worry about what "the parents" think of their progress in school, chances are you'll still get a smile with the words "well done!" ❖

Dr. Raymond J. Huntington is co-founder of Huntington Learning Center, which has helped children achieve success in school for 26 years. For more information about how Huntington can help your child, call 1-800-CAN LEARN.