A Children and Youth Guide to Building Self-Esteem

Introduction to Self-Esteem

**WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**
Self-esteem is the word we use to talk about how we feel about ourselves. We use it to describe how much we feel we can bring to the world and how much we care about ourselves.

When we talk about self-esteem, we usually talk about how much of it someone has. Someone can have a high sense of self-esteem, a low sense of self-esteem, or anywhere in between. And guess what? Our self-esteem changes. Some days you may feel like you don’t have much of it, other days you may feel like you have a lot, some days you might even just feel neutral. Why is self-esteem important? Having a healthy sense of self-esteem (not too much and not too little) is important because it can affect how motivated you feel, how easily you bounce back from things that are difficult, and what you feel you can accomplish.

Having a healthy sense of self-esteem can also help you try new things, meet new people, and make new friends. If you feel you have a low sense of self-esteem, you may have a lot of negative feelings about yourself and believe that you don’t deserve success, happiness, or love. Everyone, no matter how they feel about themselves at the time, deserves success, love, and happiness.

If you feel you have low self-esteem, that’s okay. Remember, you won’t always feel that way and improving your self-esteem is possible, even if it’s only for a couple of minutes to start.

**FEEDBACK LOOPS: SELF-ESTEEM–FACIAL DIFFERENCE–BODY IMAGE**

**Positive Feedback Loop**
- I feel good about the way I look.
- I notice positive feedback from others.
- I put more energy into caring about myself.
- I feel better about myself.

**Negative Feedback Loop**
- I feel bad about the way I look.
- I notice negative feedback from others.
- I don’t put energy into caring about myself.
- I don’t feel good about myself.
There are so many parts that make up who you are.

Yes, your face is one thing. But it is only one thing. Your hobbies, interests, personality, dislikes, skills, family, friends, gender, culture, sexuality, how you choose to present yourself, and so much more make up the many other parts of what it means to be you.

How you feel about your facial difference and your body affects your self-esteem. Your self-esteem also affects how you feel about your facial difference and your body. This two-way relationship can affect how you feel about yourself as a whole person. For example, if you don’t like your facial difference, it can be harder to like other parts of yourself. And if you don’t like other parts of yourself, it can be difficult to give yourself the time and attention you deserve to take care of yourself. The good thing is that the opposite is also true. When you like a certain part of yourself, it is easier for you to like other parts of yourself. That can make it easier to give yourself the time and attention you need to take care of yourself.

**GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS**

Everyone has good and bad days. There will be days when you feel you have low self-esteem. There will be days when you have a better sense of self-esteem. It does not have to be one or the other. Like so many other things in life, self-esteem is fluid – meaning that it will flow and change, and that’s okay. Don’t expect yourself or feel pressured to have a healthy sense of self-esteem everyday all the time. Remember, low/bad days happen and are normal. Recognizing when you are having a low day is important, but it’s good to know that it is temporary and can get better.

**What Can I Do to Build Self-Esteem?**

**BE AWARE OF HOW YOU TALK ABOUT YOURSELF**

Are you using kind words? Are you talking to yourself the way you would talk to a friend? How you talk and think about yourself matters. Positive self-talk is a skill that gives you a chance to be kind toward yourself. Practising positive affirmations can help you develop self-esteem and turn your negative thoughts about yourself into positive ones. The key is to pick sentences or make sentences that feel like you and to practise saying them! Remember, like most things we practise, it can be challenging and feel awkward to start, but the more we practise, the easier gets.

Here are some examples of positive affirmations:

- I will always do my best.
- I believe in myself and my capabilities.
- I am brave.
- I am loved.
- I am good enough, and I am fine with just being me.

**GET INVOLVED WITH AN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY**

Having a hobby, joining a club, or participating in an extracurricular activity adds one more piece to the puzzle of what makes you you. Having an interest that you like and can talk about (something that isn’t related to your facial difference) can make it easier for you to meet new people and make friends. It gives you a chance to connect over things you have in common. Remember, when you are learning a new skill or activity, practise a growth mindset. Having a growth mindset means you believe you can get better at something with time, effort, and practice. This can sound like “I can’t score a basket yet, but I can really try and work on it and get better at my shots.”
FIND POSITIVE FRIENDS
Positive friends are the people you are excited to see, who make you feel full of energy, who will support you when you are feeling down, and who inspire you to be a better person. Having positive friends is especially important on the days you are feeling down. Sometimes, if you don’t have enough energy to care for yourself, having a friend who can give you that energy is important. Being around positive friends also makes it easier to be a good friend. You might sometimes find it’s easier to cheer on a friend, even when it’s hard to cheer yourself on. In making your friends happy, you can find a path to feeling good about yourself. It’s okay to lean on others. We can’t make it through life alone.

POWER POSES AND DRESSING TO FEEL CONFIDENT
This may sound a little silly, but it can help! Think about the positive feedback loop of self-esteem–facial difference–body image on page 1. How we feel on the inside can affect how our body looks on the outside. When someone is feeling sad or down, usually their body is hunched and their head is down. Luckily, the opposite is also true. How we hold our body affects how we feel. Research shows that standing in a superhero pose with your head high, shoulders back, hands on your hips, and your feet shoulder-width apart can make a person feel more confident. If you need a little confidence boost, try out a power pose for 60 seconds. You can practise in front of a mirror, or if you’re in a crowded space, you can even practise it in your head and imagine the power pose.

The same is true for how you dress. Let’s say one day you need more confidence. Make a point of choosing your favourite outfit, something that makes you feel good about yourself and happy with what you’re wearing. This can change how you carry yourself. It can boost your self-esteem and make you feel a little bit better during the day.

TREAT YOURSELF WITH RESPECT
Sometimes we talk about the importance of treating others with respect, but we need to remember to treat ourselves with respect too. A lot of research shows that taking care of our physical body by healthy eating, exercising, and getting enough sleep contributes to increased self-esteem. Taking care of yourself in this way can make you feel good and brave, and can give you more energy. It can also help you feel in control, which is important on the days when you don’t feel you have much control. This doesn’t mean you have to focus only on being productive; you can also allow yourself to have a relaxed/lazy day when you feel like you are having a harder time regaining energy.

“Treat yourself with respect” also means treating your mind (and heart/feelings) with respect. As mentioned in the section on how to talk about yourself, take some time to look at how you do talk about yourself. Would you talk like that to a friend or someone you care about? If you wouldn’t, you shouldn’t talk about yourself that way either. Allow yourself to feel some compassion for yourself. Self-compassion includes being kind and understanding toward yourself, as you would be with a friend.

Treating yourself with respect also means respecting your boundaries. By setting boundaries you know and respect your own needs. When you’re having a good day and have a healthy sense of self-esteem and someone asks you about your facial difference, you may be happy to engage with and answer them. But when you aren’t having a good day and don’t have energy to answer questions about your facial difference, you can say to yourself, “Hey, I don’t have the energy to explain that today and I need to save this energy for myself.” Then you can say to the person asking, “I don’t feel like talking about this right now” and change the subject.
Wrap-Up

People often assume that we are born with a certain amount of self-esteem. However, this is not the case. Like other parts of our physical health, self-esteem takes time, work, and practice to develop, grow, and maintain. The more you practice it, the easier it gets over time. It is important to note that once you feel you have a healthy sense of self-esteem, the work doesn’t stop there. Remember, it is fluid. Self-esteem is a life-long journey, and working on skills and strategies now can make a difference many years down the line. Reading this document is a great first step!