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Children Learn What They Live By

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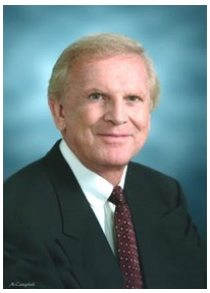

An ancient Chinese proverb tells us,"A child's life is like a piece of paper on which every passerby leaves a mark." We cannot teach our children self-esteem. We can only help them discover it within themselves by adding positive marks and strokes on their slates.

All positive motivation is rooted in self-esteem – the development of which, just as with other skills, takes practice. Think of self-esteem as a four-legged chair.

A Sense of Belonging: The first leg of self-esteem is a sense of belonging. We all have a deep-seated need to feel we're part of something larger than ourselves. This need, which psychologists call an affiliation drive, encompasses people, places and possessions. Our instinct for belonging – for being wanted, accepted, enjoyed, and loved by close ones – is extremely powerful. It explains the bond of an extended family, friends, and teammates. It also explains why some adolescents join gangs. They want to belong, even if it's wrong.

Make your children proud of their family heritage and make your home a place where they feel safe, loved and welcome. Also, make your home a

place where your children want to bring their friends, rather than a place they want to leave as soon as possible.

A Sense of Individual Identity: The second leg, which complements the sense of belonging, is a sense of individual identity. No human being is exactly like another, not even an identical twin. We are all unique combinations of talents and traits that never existed before and will never exist again in quite the same package. (This explains why most parents believe their children came from different planets!)

> **Observe your children as they grow and play. Watch their learning styles. Notice what they love to do in their free time. Help them discover their unique positive talents and help nurture them into skills.**

Report cards don't necessarily measure talents. They often are a measure only of discipline, memory and attention span.

A Sense of Worthiness: The third leg of self-esteem is a sense of worthiness, the feeling that I'm glad I'm me, with my genes and background, my body, my unique thoughts.

> **Without our own approval, we have little to offer. If we don't feel worth loving, it's hard to believe that others love us; instead, we tend to see others as appraisers or judges of our value.**

Show your children unconditional love. Carefully separate the doer from the deed, and the performer from the performance. The message: "I love you no matter what happens, and I'm always there for you" is one of most important concepts in building a feeling of worthiness or intrinsic value in children. After every reprimand, let them know you love them. Before they go to sleep at night, give them the reassurance that, regardless of what happened that day, you love them unconditionally.

A healthy sense of belonging, identity, and worthiness can only be rooted in intrinsic core values as opposed to outer, often material, motivation.

Without them, we depend on others constantly to fill our leaking reserves of self-esteem – but also tend to suspect others of ulterior motives. Unable to accept or reject others' opinions for what they're worth, we are defensive about criticism and paranoid about praise – and no amount of praise can replace the missing qualities.

A healthy sense of belonging, identity, and worthiness is also essential to belief in your dreams. It is most essential during difficult times, when you have only a dream to hang on to.

A Sense of Control and Competence: Early in my career in motivational psychology, I thought the chair of self-esteem balanced firmly on those three legs, especially since they involved intrinsic core values. It took much time and research to realize that a fourth leg – one of the most important – was missing.

There are many reasons why few Americans currently in high school and college believe they were born to win. The supportive extended family – in many cases, even the nuclear family – is disappearing. Role models are increasingly unhealthy. The commercial media bombards young senses ever more insistently with crime, violence, hedonism, and other unhealthy forms of escape. But whatever the explanation, constructive citizens and leaders in society cannot emerge and develop without the creative imagination that serves them like fuel – which is why the

apprehension, frustration, and hesitation I see and hear in the younger generation is cause for concern. At the moment, the future they imagine will help drive neither happiness nor success.

> **The chair's fourth leg is self-efficacy, a functional belief in your ability to control what happens to you in a changing, uncertain world.**

A sense of worthiness may give you the emotional means to venture, but you need self-efficacy, the sense of competence and control, to believe you can succeed.

> **That's why it is so important to assign responsibility for small tasks to your children as early as possible so they can learn that their choices and efforts result in consequences and successes.**

The more success they experience, the stronger their confidence grows – and the more responsibility they want to assume.

Give them specific household chores and duties they can accomplish and be proud of. Teach them that their problems and setbacks are just temporary inconveniences and learning experiences. Emphasize it constantly: Setbacks are not failures.

Armed with a view of failure as a learning experience, children can develop an early eagerness for new challenges and will be less afraid to try new skills. Although they appreciate compliments, they benefit most from their own belief that they are making a valuable contribution to life, according to their own internal standards.

In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, each new, young member of the workforce simply must believe that he or she is a team leader, a self-empowered, quality individual who expresses that quality in excellent production and service. With increasing pressures on profit and the need to do more with fewer workers because of e-commerce and changing technology, it is essential that parents and business leaders help raise the value of their children's and employees' stock in themselves.

Our Kids are Not Our Clones

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned in being an effective family leader and in raising six children is to: *"Treat our children with the same respect, we expect from them."* Our children are not clones or copies of us. Although they mimic us and other adults as role models, they cannot be expected to feel or act the way we do. Kahlil Gibran is my favorite on the subject:

> Your children are not your children.
> They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself….
> You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
> For they have their own thoughts.
> You may house their bodies but not their souls,
> For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit,
> Not even in your dreams.
> You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them be like you.
> For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday

Denis Waitley is one of America's most respected and beloved authors, keynote lecturers and productivity consultants on high performance human achievement. He has inspired, informed, challenged and entertained audiences for over 25 years from the

boardrooms of multi-national corporations to the control rooms of NASA's space program. Denis has been voted business speaker of the year by the Sales and Marketing Executives' Association and by Toastmasters' International and inducted into the International Speakers' Hall of Fame.

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