

# Self-Esteem

*Is your child displaying a low self-esteem?*



Is your child:

- Saying, “I’m not good enough, fast enough, smart enough or pretty enough?”
- Thinking he’ll fail the math test because he can never get that problem right?
- Saying that other people are better at soccer, reading, or singing?
- Often relying on you to guide him through homework or to talk to his teacher about that missed assignment?
- Expecting you to plan out her weekend social activities?

## LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

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Your children may have times in life when they seem to have a low self-esteem, self-image, or self-concept. These terms mean a poor sense of self and a lack of confidence in one’s own abilities. Children with low self-esteem may hesitate to put themselves out there, often waiting for guidance from you. They may shy away from new experiences or think new peers won’t like them. They may make negative self-statements that are broad and unfounded.

For example, “I’m terrible at math. I’ll probably fail” is a negative self-statement that is global and catastrophizing. Alternately, saying “division is really hard for me” is specific, controllable, and may be accurate. Saying “I’m terrible at math” is unfounded, not specific, and uncontrollable.

The “I’m terrible at math” statement is more consistent with low self-esteem. Often, low self-esteem can lead to depression. It is related to a sense of inadequacy and poor self-reliance, which are negative feelings about yourself and your capabilities.

The unfortunate consequence is that some of these negative self-statements become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Individuals who think they will fail, often do. Research shows that optimists tend to believe their performance is better than it is. As a result, they tend to take more risks, practice more, not give up, and in the end they ultimately perform as well as they think they can.

## CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

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Clinically, negative feelings about yourself can lead to depression. Having a low self-esteem leads a child to make negative self-statements. Cognitive distortions like globalization and catastrophizing re-affirm these negative beliefs.

*Globalization:* Citing one example of when something went wrong as a pervasive and overwhelming trend. For example, “That teacher is always mean” because the teacher scolded a few students for being tardy.

*Catastrophizing:* Seeing a minor problem or inconvenience as evidence for a pending disaster. For example, “I was last in the lunch line yesterday so I can’t go to school today. I will end up missing lunch and will surely starve to death.

Cognitive distortions in our thinking lead us to make sweeping negative statements that are not consistent with the facts.

***If your child is caught in this cycle of negative beliefs, it is important to consider what psychologists call ‘attributions.’ Attributions are the ways we explain things that happen to us. Happier people tend to believe that any ‘failure’ on their part is specific, changeable, and due to external factors.***

People who are unhappy tend to attribute failures to *global, unchangeable, and personal* factors [1] . If your child is caught up in the negative, practice thinking with him or her in more specific terms. For example, if your child said, “I failed that debate...I suck at talking in front of people, I’m a terrible student.”

A *specific* statement would be, “I really struggled on that debate today.”

A *changeable* statement would be, “I didn’t do well because I didn’t take enough time to practice it.”

An *externalizing (non-personal)* statement could be, “I don’t think it was really explained to us how we were supposed to prepare for this debate.”

The non-personalizing statements aren’t the same as placing blame on others. The idea here is just to teach your child that sometimes things do not go the way we wanted them or expected them to go due to factors beyond our control. We don’t want the child to carry the burden around on his shoulders.

Individuals with depression tend to have cognitive distortions that impact thinking and affect the way they look at reality. They tend to think “the glass is half empty.”

Low self-esteem often indicates poor self-reliance, or an inability to rely and believe in your own skills and abilities. It also tends to relate to feelings of inadequacy or a lack of worth, i.e. “I’m not good enough.”

These cognitive distortions can lead to depression [1], which is defined by feelings of sadness or irritability and loss of pleasure in activities one used to enjoy. Depression is also marked by feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness and by challenges with concentration and sleep and eating patterns.

An occasional negative self-statement from a child can often be countered with by highlighting evidence to the contrary or by noticing a strength. Constant evidence of low self-esteem can be indicative of depression or can leave a child vulnerable to other serious mental health concerns.

## **WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD HAS LOW SELF ESTEEM**

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In terms of strategies for someone who struggles with low self-esteem, talking to your child and, even more important, listening, can help. Hear your child’s comments and do not dismiss them as false. Sometimes just a caring and concerned posture is enough. Let your child vent his or her frustrations.

Make sure the child knows you understand first and foremost. When you offer encouragement, be realistic and specific. For example, “I understand that it feels like you are the worst student ever, but there are things we can do to make it better.”

***Be sure that your child has a number of outlets in life that he or she can feel positive about. For the child who is struggling in school, pursuing interests in music, sports and youth group can provide areas of positive outlet. “Math has been tough this year, but your recital performance last week was wonderful. You are one of the most talented violinists in your class!” This response is an example of specific positive feedback.***

Saying “You’re great!” is not as helpful as specific praise, such as “You may have had a tough time with that math assignment, but you aced your history test. We are so proud!”

To recap, hear your child's feelings, listen and offer help. Additionally, praise areas of strength. Work to support your child in an area of need. If math is the issue, offer to provide some help with tutoring or support your child in having a conversation with the teacher.

If you suspect your child has low self-esteem that may be interfering with functioning in any way (suicidal statements, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, depressed mood), it would first be important to consult with a [psychologist](#) regarding your concerns. Having someone for your child to talk to can be very helpful in recognizing and treating depression.

If your child meets criteria for depression or for a learning concern (like our example with math) or another disability, he or she may need an IEP or Section 504 Plan to provide additional supports and services at school. It will be important to share any diagnostic information or reports with your School Psychologist to get the ball rolling. For a child who is depressed, having someone to talk to at school can go a long way. A counselor or school psychologist can provide a listening ear. School staff can also work to pair your child with good peer buddies and to facilitate friendships that can support the developing of positive self-esteem.

## **SIMILAR SYMPTOMS**

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*If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.*

- [Academic problem \(Learning\)](#): children who struggle in school often have difficulties with self-esteem
- [Social skills problems \(Socializing\)](#): children with poor social skills generally have low self-esteem
- [Emotion regulation](#): children who struggle with emotional regulation often have poor self-esteem
- [General anxiety](#): children who are nervous, perfectionistic, or who worry a lot may have poor self-esteem
- [Victim of bullying \(Bullying\)](#): children with low self-esteem have been victims or perpetrators of bullying; some may also struggle with frequent peer conflict
- [Depression](#): children who are often sad or unmotivated generally have a low self-esteem

## POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

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Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. \*Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.

- **Depression:** depressed mood or irritability, loss of pleasure in activities, feelings of worthlessness that impact day-to-day functioning
- **Anxiety:** excessive worries across a number of contexts occurring more days than not and impacting day-to-day functioning
- **Learning Disability (Educationally Identified Disabilities):** challenges with reading, writing or math. Often, school-aged children who have these challenges develop low self-esteem because school is such a huge part of a child's life.

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

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If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- **CLEAR Child Psychology:** to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child or to *consult 'live'* with a psychologist
- **Psychologist or Neuropsychologist:** to consider symptoms in mental health and brain based context
- **School Psychologist:** to consider for a 504 plan or IEP

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- **Emotional rating scales and projective measures including BASC-3, RCMAS, CDI, storytelling and drawing tasks:** for emotional assessment of anxiety, self-esteem, sense of inadequacy, self-reliance
- Other areas may be assessed depending on the context and may be based on the areas of concern, such as cognitive, social, learning, etc.

## LEARN MORE

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[1] Seligman, Martin E.P. (1995). *The optimistic child: A revolutionary program that safeguards children against depression and builds lifelong resilience.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Optimistic-Child-Revolutionary-Safeguards-Depression/dp/B0028UJKPQ/>

[2] Positive Action Curriculum (6<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum specifically addresses self-esteem) <https://www.positiveaction.net/>

[3] Freeland, Claire A. B. & Toner, Jacqueline B. (2016). *What to do when you feel too shy: A kid's guide to overcoming social anxiety.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/What-When-You-Feel-What-/dp/1433822768>

[4] Guest, Jennifer (2016). *The CBT art activity book: 100 illustrated handouts for creative therapeutic work.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/CBT-Art-Activity-Book-illustrated/dp/184905665X/>

[5] Mulcahy, William (2016). *Zach makes mistakes.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Zach-Makes-Mistakes-Rules/dp/1631981102/>

[6] Moss, Wendy L. (2010) *Being Me: A Kid's Guide to Boosting Confidence and Self-esteem.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Being-Me-Confidence-Self-esteem-2010-11-15/dp/B01NH061UA/>

[7] McCumbee, Stephie (2014). *Priscilla & the perfect storm.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Priscilla-Perfect-Storm-Stephie-McCumbee/dp/1934490601/>

[8] Gordon, Jon (2012). *The energy bus for kids: A story about staying positive and overcoming challenges.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Energy-Bus-Kids-Overcoming-Challenges/dp/1118287355/>

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How to help a child with low self-esteem

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