The Gift of Self-Esteem

Black children can face numerous challenges to their self-confidence. Here's how to prime your child to succeed and stay strong.

September 2, 2005 By Denene Millner

When I turned 14, my butt became a menace. It was too bubbly for white-girl jeans. Too boy-tempting. Too fat. And so my behind became another thing—along with my dark skin and extra-kinky hair—to make me feel self-conscious and ashamed. It wasn't until I got around some proud-to-be-black/good-God-how-did-you-get-all-that-into-them-jeans college men that I learned not only to accept, but love every inch of myself.

Years later, after my own daughter was born, the attitudes of those around me hadn't changed much. My father told me to keep the baby out of the sun so she wouldn't "get black." My brother teased her about her "nappy" hair. By the time my second daughter was born, foul rap lyrics and sexually explicit TV shows were so common that my husband and I had to forego BET and some of our favorite magazines. We didn't want our daughters to pick up on negative messages that devalued their minds, bodies and spirits.

The self-esteem of my children—and African-American children everywhere—is under serious threat. But shielding them from thoughtless family members and keeping the TV off isn't always an option. So how exactly does a black parent raise a child to love himself? The trick, experts say, is to be proactive—to use a careful mix of protection, praise and confidence-building before the world (or just your slick-talking cousin Keisha) taints the way she perceives herself. Here are six great ways to boost your child's self-esteem.

Hold up the mirror

Not many days go by without Marcia Davis-Allison telling her 6-year-old daughter, Simone, how beautiful she is—from the top of her twist-covered head to the soles of her chocolate-brown feet. "As black people, subtle and overt racism swirl around us constantly, and if you're not wearing the armor of self-love, you don't stand a chance of being a whole person," says Davis-Allison, an attorney in South Orange, New Jersey.

Indeed, making sure your child believes she's beautiful is one of the most important self-esteem boosts you can give her, says Darlene Powell-Garlington, PhD, a Southington, Connecticut–based clinical psychologist and co-author of Raising the Rainbow Generation: Teaching Your Children to Be Successful in a Multicultural Society. "If your self-image is influenced by society's mixed-up

notions of what's beautiful and you don't fit into that, then you'll think you're not as attractive, and that affects your place in the world. Children can become pessimistic, withdrawn or depressed."

So from the moment your child is conceived, you should be filling his world with as many healthy images of black people as you can find. When Melanie Worthy-Carter's daughter Zoe was born, she stocked her room with books featuring black characters (see "A Self-Esteem Library") and loaded up her toy chest with black dolls. "I wanted black images to be a part of her existence from the beginning," says Worthy-Carter, who lives in Los Angeles. Hang pictures of black children on the walls or change the words in lullabies to note her beautiful eyes and brown skin so she can "see herself and her beauty in as many ways as possible," adds Powell-Garlington.

Other ways you can help your child appreciate his own beauty and culture is by taking him to play groups,cultural events and church and community activities that celebrate black folks. Also, the early school years are a great time to incorporate black history into your child's curriculum to help him develop pride in his culture. Davis found a day camp where Simone learns about everything from Kemet to the Tuskegee Airmen.

Watch the way you discipline

"Children are to be seen, not heard" was the centerpiece of my mom's "How to Keep Your Kids in Check" child-rearing strategy. And if my brother and I made ourselves heard at the wrong time—while she was watching her television show, for example—wham!—that was your behind.

The problem is that countless medical studies, including one released in September 2004 by the University of Michigan, have shown time and time again that children who are spanked as a form of discipline are more likely to misbehave when they get older, including cheating, lying and acting out at school—all symptoms of low self-esteem. Similarly,children who are constantly yelled at and criticized are bound to feel bad about them- selves, says Jawanza Kunjufu, PhD, author of Developing Positive Self-Images and Discipline in Black Children. "Words are powerful, and teachers and parents need to be very careful about the words they choose. A parent might curse their child and then buy him gym shoes, thinking that will take back what they've said. But believe me, children take that to the grave."

That's not to say you need to be a punk about disciplining your child. But there's something to trying logic and tenderness in order to get your child to do what you want and maintain self-esteem in the process, says Elizabeth Berger, MD, author of Raising Children With Character. That means that, instead of hitting your child for, say, running through the living room when you just told him not to, you might try telling him why it's not a good idea—logic that will not only help your child understand consequences and learn self-control, but make him feel good about making decisions for himself.

Of course, 2-year-olds won't understand logic and consequences for all the same reasons they won't necessarily understand why they're being hit (or remember two minutes later). Instead of yelling or hitting, try distracting your child, or removing him from the situation. He's smushing Play-Doh into the carpet? Take the Play-Doh away, and give him blocks. When he gets a little

older, you might try time-outs or consequences, i.e., “If you smush Play-Doh into the carpet after I told you not to, you won’t get to play with it for the rest of the week.”

Check your people

Some of the most deflating comments your child will ever hear about herself will most likely come directly from the people who love her the most—Aunt Esther, who thinks dark-skinned kids should be dipped in Ambi, for example. “Kids are very perceptive, so it’s a parent’s responsibility to let family and community members know, even if you’re uncomfortable,” Powell-Garlington says. “Say, ‘I know you didn’t mean to be harmful or hurtful, but if you have something to say to my child, I would prefer you say it in a different, more sensitive way.’”

It’s important, too, that if someone says something untoward to your child that you pull him aside and talk through his feelings, particularly if he’s old enough to feel bad about the comment.

By age 5, your child not only notices ethnic differences, but attaches meaning to them, says Powell-Garlington. That means that if the teacher says a simple “hi” to your child, but gushes a hearty hello to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Emma, your kid is likely to feel inferior to his white or fairer-skinned counterparts. That’s when it’s important to assess the situation with your child. “You want to say, ‘What makes you feel that way?’” says Powell-Garlington. “Then make sure to reinforce how beautiful or smart he is.”

Manage their influences

According to Dr. Kunjufu, a University of Michigan study in the 1950s found that the greatest influence on children was the home, followed by school, church, peer pressure and television. In the late 1990s, however, peer pressure was the number one influence, followed by rap music, TV, home and school, according to a study from Motivational Educational Entertainment. That means that, as a teen, your child is more likely to believe the stuff his friend Pookie and others are whispering in his ear than listen to you.

Indeed, everything, from how your child dresses to how well she does in school, can lead to her acceptance or rejection by peers. “If you’re led to believe that you’ll be more popular if you’re better in sports than science, or rap than reading—but you really don’t like basketball or rap—what do you think that does to your self-esteem?” says Kunjufu.

“Unfortunately, many of our youth decide to just fall into the ranks. I wonder how many doctors, computer technicians and engineers we’ve lost because of this mind-set.”

Parents also need to manage the influence that medialike music, videos and TV have on their children. For example, your son might think he needs to emulate 50 Cent’s thug-bravado to score with girls, and your daughter might think she needs to wear scanty clothing to get boys’ attention.

“Some parents try to ignore the music, but it permeates the culture and we need these images and lyrics to teach important lessons,” Kunjufu says. Instead of banning BET’s 106 & Park, watch the program and listen to the music with your children—then discuss what you watched, he

suggests. Ask their opinion about women being called “bitches.” “Ask your child, ‘What are [the videos] trying to teach us?’” Kunjufu says.

Be careful, though, not to be too critical of what your children like, says Michael Rich, director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital Boston. Doing so will make them think they’re violating social rules, “which is exactly what they want to do,” he says. “Instead say, ‘This is what you look like. Is this what you want to sell to the world?’ Then it becomes more about their self–image, rather than about something that’s offensive to you.”

Get them involved

If your child doesn’t have a day planner, you might want to get him one, says Kunjufu. An idle child, after all, is often the troubled child. But a kid who’s got something constructive to do, like volunteering at the local park or playing ball on a team, is not only busy, but more likely to feel good about himself. A bonus: The more diverse his activities, the more likely he’ll be to latch onto important human values, like compassion, tolerance and community responsibility.

So go ahead—program your child’s day, says Kunjufu. “Get them involved in athletics, especially boys whose fathers aren’t present. Athletics provide structure, program a child’s time, develop his body and make the coach a role model. My track coach had almost as much influence in my life as my father. You have to create opportunities for them to find that balance when they walk out your door and you’re not around.”

Keep them connected

Jamilah Long knew that when her son Dominick was born, it was important to foster the bond between him and his father, even though she is no longer involved with him. “A mother can do a lot, but when you have both parents, you have a complete package, and I really wanted my son to grow up having someone he wanted to be like.”

Of course, in the real world, making sure your child bonds with his dad may be easier said than done. But you do have access to relatives—Uncle Mike might be down for a weekly game of catch and some long talks. And there are always ways to find healthy mentors through the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program and other organizations like the Boy Scouts and 4H.

Don’t undervalue your role if you’re a single parent, though. It’s easy to get so wrapped up in work, paying bills and trying to make ends meet that we start to forget our child’s needs. If you’re working when your child comes home from school, check in with him by phone—ask him about his day. Or sit down with her at breakfast and ask her about her plans. If he’s in daycare or with a sitter, call to find out about his progress and behavior—or just to say “I love you.” Knowing there’s someone there for him, after all, goes along way in helping a child love himself unconditionally.

A SELF-ESTEEM LIBRARY

Books, CDs and videos that build confidence at every age

Books

- Pretty Brown Face, Andrea Pinkney (birth to 3 years; Red Wagon Books, $5.95)
- I Love My Hair!, Natasha Anastasia Tarpley (ages 3-5; Megan Tingley, $16.99)
- Beautiful Black Bird, Ashley Brian (ages 3-5; Antheneum, $16.95)
- Dancing in the Wings, Debbie Allen (ages 5-8; Dial Books, $16.99)
- Amazing Grace, Mary Hoffman (ages 5-8; Dial, $16.99)
- The Skin I'm In, Sharon G. Flake (ages 8-12; Jump at the Sun, $5.99)
- Bud, Not Buddy, Christopher Paul Curtis (ages 8-12; Yearling, $6.50)
- Shake It to the One That You Love the Best: Play Songs and Lullabies From Black Musical Traditions, Cheryl Warren Mattox (ages 5-8; JTG of Nashville, $9.95)

CDs

- African Lullaby, various artists (birth to 3 years; Ellipses Art, $15.98)
- Walk Together Children: A Collection of the Most Cherished Spirituals, various artists (Ages 3-5; Twin Sister Records, $16.99)

DVDs/Videos

- Elmopalooza (not a "black" video, but it features diverse characters and musical acts, including the Fugees and David Allan Grier) (ages 3-5; Sony Wonder, $12.98)
- Happily Ever After Collection: Fairy Tales for Every Child (Mother Goose/ Pinocchio/The Pied Piper/The Golden Goose) (ages5-8; Warner Home Video, $19.98)
- Remember the Titans, starring Denzel Washington (ages 8-12; Warner Video, $19.98)

Books for Parents

- Developing Positive Self-Images and Discipline in Black Children, Jawanza Kunjufu, PhD (African-American Images, $9.95)
- Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society, Darlene Powell Hopson (Fireside, $19.95)
- Smart Parenting for African Americans: Helping Your Kids Thrive in a Difficult World, Jeffrey

Gardere, PhD (Dafina Books, $14)
