

## Curtains, Pancakes and Broom Hockey: 12 Ways to Build Self Esteem in Kids

Few things are as rewarding as seeing your child glow from the inside out. And it happens when children have a high self esteem: when they know themselves to be unconditionally accepted, when they feel both loved and lovable, and when they feel a sense of belonging and self worth. Here are twelve simple activities that have really made a difference in our family. These are the rituals that I find especially important to staying connected and to communicating my love and appreciation for each child.

1. Rely on rituals to help you reconnect. We have such a ritual following every school day. The kids think of it as "after school snack time" but I know it to be much more than that. It is a time when they tell me whatever they like about their day. Try to create this special time as soon as possible after their day away at school. I find that if I wait until later in the evening to ask them the same open ended questions, I hear mostly "I do not remember" and "Everything was fine." For us, immediacy is important, and so is the ability to sit and listen without offering too much unsolicited advice. Family dinners are another wonderful time to reconnect.
2. Create special time for just your immediate family. To do this, you may need to set gentle boundaries for neighbors and friends. For example, we have a neighborhood filled with very close relationships and no fewer than 14 young children. When we first moved in, we had kids knocking on our door from the crack of dawn till way past the sun set in the evening. We found that our time alone as a family was diminishing by the day as our younger children would run outside to play at the first invitation, and the competition from such a fun outdoor world really disrupted the closeness of certain special family times. It did not take long before our family relationship was feeling the stress, so we chose a symbol that is universally accepted and respected throughout the neighborhood: when the curtains on our front windows are drawn, the neighborhood children know that we are having time together as a family. When the curtains open for the day, we welcome the neighborhood children with open arms. I hope this gentle boundary sends a message to our kids, too, that it is okay (essential, even) to take time out for yourself and for nurturing the relationships with your closest loved ones.
3. Give each child tangible reminders of your love. You could write a note to your child on each birthday, detailing events over the past year that made you particularly proud and spotlighting traits that make him or her special. Or keep a jar, box, or journal titled "Things I Love About You" and add notes to it whenever they occur to you. Whenever your child is feeling down, he or she can spend a few moments with these treasures.
4. Develop a special song or phrase for each of your children. My second child, for example, has always adored the song "You are my sunshine," but part of the song defines the relationship in terms of exclusivity. ("You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.") So we had to adapt it for each of the other children. To do this, we substituted a special word for each child and that has become their own special song. My son is Moonshine and my older daughter is Starshine. (In case you are wondering, Mom is Heartshine and Dad is SuperHeroshine. No kidding.) Even as they get older, they love to hear their own special song and they love to sing the songs to one another, too.
5. Use repetitive phrases to teach important life lessons. With my oldest child, we are working to help her feel a sense of control over her own emotions. Whenever something comes up, we say these words repeatedly: "You can not choose what people do, but you can choose how you react to it." I have heard her say it now, too, to her younger siblings. Choose an important lesson that you want to pass on. Then figure out an easy way to say it, and say it often. You might even want to make it a little melody.
6. Carve out "one on one" time with each child. Try to come up with a shared activity that honors what each of you enjoy. My daughter loves to go on a date to Starbucks, just the two of us, for a shared Double Chocolate Chip Frappuccino. The other likes to go to the library where we each choose special books. The other likes to ride his tricycle up and down the neighborhood streets with me running alongside. This does not have to take a lot of time and can involve an activity that you would be doing anyway. You can even decide to allow one child to go to bed a bit later each week so you have some time alone to chat, read together, or play a game of cards.
7. Create a safe environment. It has been really important for us to make the kids know it is safe to make mistakes. As someone who has battled perfectionism in the past, I know that the unconditional acceptance of a family is vital. When your home is a safe place for your children to share their mistakes and perceived failures as well as their triumphs, you foster a sense of safety and acceptance. You might want to share times in your own life when you made a mistake (or even those times when a perceived mistake was actually a blessing.) And try to pay close attention to an overemphasis on criticizing or correcting your child, as well as to an overemphasis of criticizing things that other people do.
8. Engage your children in the tasks of the household. This fosters a sense of belongingness and personal responsibility, a mutual respect and a sense of teamwork. There are jobs that children of all ages can do. Maybe it is setting the table or passing out the napkins. My three year old son likes to help me sweep the floor, but I suspect he really just likes to play broom hockey with the crumbs. At some point, they grow up enough where their efforts to help are actually helpful. One child likes to help me make dinner, another likes to help me clean up. We are still working on my son. . .
9. Make simple occasions special. The kids love it when we turn off all the lights at dinner and eat by candlelight. It makes them feel treasured, and we talk about how just a simple change in the way we do things can make all the difference.
10. Show your enthusiasm. I remember as a child, even if my mom or dad was embroiled in a task, I knew that they were happy I was around. The deep roots of self esteem that come from such a knowing have affected everything I have done since. Even if you are busy, make sure your enthusiasm shows when your child walks into the room. You do not have to stop what you are doing. Just send them signals, verbal or nonverbal, that you are happy they arrived.
11. Praise. So much has been said lately about the danger of overpraising a child, and it is certainly important to be careful when offering praise. You want the child to reward themselves internally for a job well done, and not to be constantly looking for a carrot. I have recently heard it said that the most positive kind of praise occurs when you are praising their personal judgment, and I think that is very wise. Lots of healthy praise is a beautiful thing.
12. Reflect often on the beauty (and the power) of parenting. Here is a ritual from my household: Once my children have fallen asleep at night, I watch them peacefully sleep for a few moments and think about how much happiness they created that day for me. I try to quiet my mind, just for a moment or two, and think about how very much I adore them. Meditating on this inner knowing, however briefly, can make it easier to be tolerant of those little things that all children do to drive us nuts. It is also helpful to think often about how instrumental your love will be to their happiness and their worldview both now and way off into the

future.

### About the Author

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