





# too much

## OF A GOOD THING?

We encourage them, we celebrate them, and we give them stickers and stars. But are we doing more harm than good?

By **Samantha Cleaver**

**A**sk Korean eighth graders, “Are you good at math?” and chances are they’ll say they aren’t. Ask an American, and you’ll likely get an enthusiastic response. In a recent study, only six percent of Korean eighth graders considered themselves excellent math students, compared with 39 percent of American eighth graders. Yet the Korean students scored far better in math than their American peers.

We’ve taught our children since birth to believe they can do anything they choose, from starring in the school play to mastering long division. All that self-confidence, however, hasn’t produced more capable students. The Brookings Institution 2006 Brown Center Report on Education finds that countries in which families and schools emphasize self-esteem for students—America for

example—lag behind the cultures that don’t focus on how students feel about themselves.

For decades our culture has concentrated on teaching self-esteem first, learning second. In the late 1980s, a California government task force found no connection between low self-esteem and societal ills, such as drug use, teen pregnancy, and school underachievement. Still, California forged ahead with a self-esteem education plan. Today, raising children’s self-esteem continues to be a primary goal in the classroom, and a goal of parents at home.

Downplaying grades, praising children for minimal effort, or using neutral-colored green or purple pens to comment on written work seems harmless enough, but we may be taking away the sense of satisfaction and pride that comes from genuine achievement. Jason Walsh, a special education teacher in Washington, D.C., witnessed

this firsthand during his school's fifth-grade graduation ceremonies. Some students received as many as 14 different awards. "The majority of the students didn't know what their awards really meant," says Walsh. The honors "didn't reinforce a specific achievement—but a sense of entitlement and of being great."

The long-term impact of this rah-rah mentality is already apparent. In 2004, according to Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, 70 percent of American college freshmen reported their academic ability as "above average." But, once ego-inflated students get to college, they're more likely to drop out, says Twenge, when their skewed sense of self and overconfidence affects their ability to make decisions.

A growing contingent of experts agree that in the classroom, self-esteem should be an outcome, not a method. "Self-esteem," says Robert Brooks, Harvard Medical School faculty psychologist, "is based on real accomplishments." It's all about letting kids shine in a realistic way.

## FEEL-GOOD ACADEMICS

There is a correlation between self-esteem and grades; studies have shown that high grades do lead to high self-esteem. But rather than praising children for every effort along the way, we should encourage them to focus on achieving particular goals and applaud that achievement. The danger of too much praise is that children may turn their focus to how good they feel and how to get more praise, rather than on what they're learning. "All children should be held accountable," says Karen Bernstein, music teacher at Howard B. Mattlin Middle School in Long Island, New York. "We shouldn't worry about setting boundaries for kids because of their feelings." In her classroom, Bernstein makes children responsible for their actions, so that when they do achieve, "they feel good."

If a student's confidence isn't built on his or her actual abilities, failure can be devastating. Walsh worries that his students' sense of greatness may lead to a "psychological crash and burn" because

## The Myths of Self-Esteem

*It's easy to fall for these popular truisms. Can you separate fact from fiction?*

**Myth:** Low self-esteem is the primary cause of low academic achievement.

**Fact:** It's the other way around. Academic failure contributes to low self-esteem, just as academic success contributes to high self-esteem.

**Myth:** Self-esteem, or how a child feels about herself or himself, predicts life success.

**Fact:** A child's level of self-control and ability to delay rewards is the strongest predictor of life success. Children with a strong internal locus of self-control have higher grades and finish more years of school. They are also less likely to use drugs or have teenage pregnancies.

**Myth:** African-American students have low self-esteem.

**Fact:** African-American students' self-esteem is at the same level, if not higher, than their Caucasian peers.

**Myth:** Low self-esteem causes aggressive behavior.

**Fact:** Bullies and other aggressive individuals have a high self-regard and may even have too much global self-esteem.



they don't understand why they failed. Walsh's hunch is on track, according to experts; children who work solely for praise don't feel intrinsic satisfaction. Even if a child feels competent, says John Shindler, associate professor of education at California State University, it's not real competence if it's rooted in constant praise.

Furthermore, students absorbed with their own sense of self often have trouble completing difficult tasks. One study shows that adolescent girls have lower self-esteem than adolescent boys. When confronted with a low score, the girls are more likely to work to improve their performance, while the boys are more likely to give up and change activities. "The real issue," says Rick Weissbourd, who teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, "is getting kids to develop a sense of self-efficacy, along with real competencies and skills. Self-esteem will follow."

## WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

The latest findings on self-esteem can be dispiriting for teachers. After all, who wouldn't want to make students feel good about themselves? Rather than tear down your "Shoot for the Stars" poster, reassess your priorities. Make sure that your primary focus is on student performance and improvement, rather than how kids feel about themselves. Emphasize effort and specific character traits, such as persistence, helpfulness, and consideration.

Students need to see that achievement is related to the effort they put out. Establish clear expectations and rubrics that students can use to achieve the outcome, with effort as one of the criteria for success. If a student has trouble with large goals, says Bernstein, break the task into achievable chunks.

It's all about realism, adds Twenge. Instead of focusing on how great the students are, highlight students' real strengths. Teach them that none of us can be good at everything all the time. Weissbourd recommends that for each child in your class, identify three of his or her strengths and then make a plan to highlight those strengths. >>

Ask your students, what can they learn from this situation? What can they contribute? What do they want to achieve this week, month, or year? Then help them create goals and ways to achieve those goals.

Focus on actions and real character traits, not “special” and “great.” The best kind of praise, says Weissbourd, “communicates a specific achievement and the importance of effort in that achievement.” When you correct children, focus on what they can do better next time and show them how.

Don’t shelter children from failure. Children who are shielded from failure are not prepared to deal with adversity. When students fail, tell them exactly why and provide clear ways for them to succeed the next time. To break the ice, suggests Brooks, tell your students about a time when you failed in school and how you recovered.

## A CLASSROOM FULL OF VIPS

Of course, you are working with children who have already been raised in a self-esteem world. They may think that they deserve recognition regardless of how they perform and believe they should be considered first. Kids who act out don’t have poor self-esteem, says Twenge. Instead, they often think that they’re the most important person in the room and that everyone else is getting in their way.

When a child is disruptive, you need to figure out why the child is acting that way and work with him or her to fix it. William Ricks, a teacher in Sussex, Virginia, asks his students to walk with him in the hall to talk with him about their behavior. “I try to find the root of their attitude,” says Reid, “and then I talk to them about humility.” Addressing students’ needs is crucial for behavior and academics. Once students’ “social and emotional needs are met,” says Bernstein, “they will be more likely to work harder.”

Focusing on praise and avoiding criticism makes everybody feel good. But children who have high self-esteem may become rude and uncooperative when they’re criticized. Still, “don’t try to

## Replace praise with coaching towards success



*The Gesell Institute outlines the following principles to guide teachers.*

**Develop a relationship:** The best form of discipline and motivation, says Brooks, is having a relationship with your students. It’s as easy as smiling, calling them by name, and getting to know them individually.

**Involve the students:** At the beginning of the year, Bernstein works with her students to come up with the class rules, consequences, and rewards. “Of course,” she says, “you’re pushing them toward rewards and consequences that will work.” Brooks recommends leading the students in an orientation period to discuss fairness and how to handle failure, criticism, and frustration.

**Expect accountability:** Help students develop responsibility for their actions by providing them with choices and expecting accountability. Use behavior contracts with students who have a hard time seeing cause and effect in their behavior or academics.

**Teach care for others:** Discuss how to get along with others. Reward students for acknowledging others’ concerns. Provide time for group work and rotate the grouping so that students work with everyone.

1/3 Vertical  
Left

protect students from failure,” says Jennifer Crocker, Claude M. Steele Collegiate Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan. Instead, when we make failure a learning experience and not a threat, students’ self-esteem isn’t on the line, and they’re more open to taking constructive criticism.

Young children are naturally narcissistic, and teaching them self-esteem keeps them focused on themselves, instead of thinking about others. “Narcissism separates you from other people,” says Twenge, while true “self-esteem brings you into connection with other people.” In the long term, narcissism has been linked with aggression and poor relationships, while connecting children to other people has a positive affect on behavior. And, says Crocker, children learn more when they’re supportive of others.

More important than self-esteem, says Weissbourd, is a child’s maturity, or the ability to be aware of others, coordinate other people’s needs with his or her own, and regulate intense feelings. By rewarding our students’ social successes, such as helping their peers, being good community members, and listening, we increase their genuine self-esteem and improve their behavior. Allowing children to help around the classroom, says Brooks, increases their “realistic self-esteem [because children are] making a positive difference in the life of someone else.”

Walsh has worked with students who have inflated egos and no sense of responsibility or respect. Too much self-esteem, he says, “creates a sense of entitlement. I’m not saying that children don’t need reinforcement, but you have to make sure that you develop a realistic, practical, and consistent behavior plan.” When we focus on building students’ self-control, sense of belonging, and competence, we create more self-esteem than we do if we dole out constant praise. “Genuine self-esteem,” says Shindler, is “a set of unconscious self-beliefs, formed over a lifetime, reflecting our perceptions and abilities, our ability to love, and how we attribute causality for the events in our lives.” □

2/3 Vertical Right