



MAKING CHILDREN MIND WITHOUT LOSING YOURS

*How to Bring out the Best in Kids
by Doing What Is Best for Them*

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THE ABCs OF SELF-ESTEEM

*Helping Kids Feel Good about Themselves
for All the Right Reasons*

When children feel good about themselves, they want to do better things and be better people. Children who have opportunities to give back and contribute something of themselves automatically grow in self-esteem. Although a child's self-esteem can be nurtured and bolstered by others, it cannot be created by others. As a parent, teacher or other authority figure in a child's life, you are a significant influence in guiding and encouraging the child toward a strong sense of self-esteem. Here are three keys to building self-esteem in children that I'd like you to consider.

THE ABCs OF SELF-ESTEEM

- **ACCEPTANCE**—*Accept children for who they are as individuals.*

Like snowflakes, no two children are alike. Birth-order, personality, intelligence, parents' marital status, siblings, peers, neighborhood, extra-curricular activities, and outside interests vary from child to child. Categorizing a child according to "who his brother or sister is" or "her mom is head of the PTO" or "his parents drive a Mercedes" or "she doesn't make grades like her sister" does not accurately or fairly characterize a child. Discover who children are as individuals, accept them on that basis, and allow them the freedom of their individuality. They may not be all you envision them to be or all you want them to be, but acceptance of who they are is the starting point for their journey into all they can become.

- **BELONGING**—*Make sure children have a sense of belonging.*

Whether at school, on a team, in a club or at home, children have a desperate need to feel like they belong, and they will try to find a place where they can assimilate within a group. If children do not feel like they belong in the "right" place, they will likely find a "wrong" place in which they can belong.

The Franklin family moves to town, and their twins, Kara and Max, enroll in a new school. As new students, Kara and Max face the daunting tasks of making new friends, meeting new teachers and finding their way around a new campus. Kara, a quiet and attentive student, befriends a girl in her French class during the first week of school, and quickly joins the French Club. She has always had a dream to study abroad in Paris during college.

Max, on the other hand, is an excellent athlete, but he has arrived too late in the year to try out for the basketball team. Although Max made some effort to get to know some of the guys on the team, to them he is merely a new kid who wants to play on the team. Angry at not being able to play basketball and finding it difficult to make friends with students who share his interests, Max sulks around school and home for weeks. One day a football player named Kevin approaches him at lunch and says that he has seen Max around. Kevin is a big kid who runs with a rougher crowd than Max is accustomed to. Max, however, is so glad to make a friend who likes sports that he starts hanging out with Kevin and his buddies.

Max does not agree with some of the things Kevin and his friends do, but he is so relieved to have friends, he keeps his thoughts to himself. As Max spends more time with his new pals, he gets used to their habits and interests, and starts going along with some of the activities he previously avoided. Max starts smoking, saying unkind things about people at school, letting his schoolwork slide, and finally gets caught one night stealing beer from a local convenience store. His parents come to post bail for Max and ask themselves where they went wrong.

Most kids don't set out to be "bad" kids. They have this desperate need to belong to some group, and when they don't find the "right" group, they often wind up finding the "wrong" group. Max didn't set out to get in trouble, but he made some bad choices because his need to belong was met through the wrong set of friends.

A child's need to belong does not mean that he has to be the most well-liked or the most popular kid in school, and his parents must not try to make him that. As a parent, do not become "popularity police" for your children, making their popularity your personal priority. Popularity differs greatly from belonging, nor are personal status and involvement in activities valid substitutes for relationships. Relationships are necessary to establish a sense of belonging, because in relationships children feel like they are contributing something in return for which they feel good about themselves.

- **COMPETENCE—*Help children develop competence.***

There's a well-known quotation hanging in many classrooms across the country that says, "No one can do everything, but everyone can do something." All people have something they can do and at which they can improve. Focus on what your children *can* do, rather than what they *cannot* do. If a child shows a developing interest in leaves and insects, encourage her to explore those areas further. You may think that collecting leaves is boring and that bugs are disgusting, but it is important to allow children to have interests that are uniquely their own, even if they are completely different from yours. If a child shows an improvement in handwriting or speed skating, encourage him in those efforts, focusing on the child rather than simply on the act itself. Again, it is vitally

important that you allow children the freedom to be different from you. Beware of being critical in your assessment of their abilities. Children can wilt quickly under a critical eye. Encourage them as they develop competence in life, because an important developmental component of self-esteem is cultivated through competence and a sense of industry. Foster the idea that participating, working toward something, learning to make decisions on their own, and achieving good results are important ingredients of a strong self-esteem.

BELONGING IN A BLENDED FAMILY

So many families today consist of parents and stepparents who work together within the family unit to ensure that the children in their home are loved and cared for. After an intact family divides, and later two families blend to form one unit, don't expect a party. Expect a struggle. In fact, some families don't blend—they collide! Part of the struggle is the result of children searching for their place within the new family where the members are unfamiliar and unpredictable. Here are some ways parents can ease the adjustment process in a blended family.

1. Discipline your own kids first.

As discussed earlier, rules without relationships eventually lead to rebellion. If you don't have a solid relationship with your stepchildren, they will resent you for what they may see as your interference or bossiness. Remember, everyone is adjusting to a new situation, and children need time to get used to their new living environment. Discuss discipline with your spouse and come to an agreement concerning issues that are likely to arise. Problems will definitely arise if one parent is much more lenient or much harsher than the other. Together, you will want to work out a plan for consistent discipline so that your children feel that they are being treated fairly and equally.

2. Create a new home by starting out in another house.

Literally, and if at all possible, move into another residence, one that is new to everyone involved. When one family moves into a home where another family already resides, there is bound to be resentment on both sides as "strangers" now have to share space and belongings. The ones who are moving in feel like perpetual guests, and those whose "turf" is being invaded feel like their home is being taken over by outsiders with whom they must now share much of their previously "private world." To cultivate a real sense of belonging, try to establish a new home in a fresh space where your blended family can initiate a new beginning together.

3. Compare rulebooks.

Realize that you and your spouse may not share the same expectations for child discipline. Children will notice if a parent is favoring one child over the other,

and this hardly encourages a sense of belonging. Sit down with your spouse and work out a plan for discipline, and involve your children in the process. Be clear with them that you are a family and that you will all be working together to make sure that your home is a harmonious one. Devise a plan that outlines your family's expectations and the role each person will play in your family's success. Contributing to a family's growth and being a responsible part of a household is an excellent way for children to build self-esteem. Children do not just want to *feel* like a part of your family, they need to *be* a part of your family.

4. *Children don't have to love you, but they do have to respect you—and vice versa.*

Respect is not commanded—it is earned. You cannot expect any children, including stepchildren, to submit to your authority just because you think they should or say they should. The best way to earn someone's respect is to show that person the same respect you would like to receive. Hopefully, your stepchildren will grow to love you, but you cannot force them to love you. Begin the relationship by showing mutual respect for one another.

5. *Allow grief for the lost past.*

As families blend and relocate, stepchildren are mourning not only the loss of a parent, but also the loss of the "familiar." The children in your household will experience a variety of emotions, not the least of which is grief for what they have lost, including the death of the dream that their parents would always be married or would reunite after having been separated. Allow children to experience a full range of emotions, including grief. At the same time, however, emphasize that while the past should be remembered, today's reality is that the past is gone. Reassure children that while things have changed, there will be ample opportunity for them to maintain relationships with missing parents, siblings and relatives. Try to make your new home a warm place for everyone in the family unit as you all move forward together.

6. *Deal with anger in a positive way.*

Anger is not only one of the stages of grief, it is a common emotion expressed by children who feel overwhelmed by change and feelings of insecurity concerning their place in the new family. It is natural for people to get angry when they believe they are being treated unjustly; and the resettling of blended families can seem unfair, even though the parents are doing their best to make a smooth transition. Set some ground rules in advance, but make time for your family to sit down together and discuss their feelings. Being able to express feelings in a group will help your children feel like they are a part of things and will encourage their sense of belonging and boost their self-esteem.

7. *Value individuality, but expect cooperation and contribution.*

All members of your family are individuals who should be valued for their different thoughts, feelings, interests, personalities and abilities. Even though individuality is important, it is also crucial that children appreciate the necessity of contributing to the group. Assign each child in your family at least one responsibility, based on his or her age, interests, and abilities. Participating cooperatively in the success of the household is an excellent way to build your child's self-esteem and encourage feelings of acceptance, belonging and competence. A child cannot develop self-esteem without working at it.

8. *Build a team.*

In a real sense, your family is a team, and the success of your team depends on how well everyone cooperates and works together. Encourage your children to feel a part of your new family, but don't try to force or push them. Allow some time for respect to develop and grow, and over time your blended family will have an excellent chance of making the adjustments satisfactorily.

IN CONCLUSION

All children have the need to belong. Whether at home, school, church, club or on a team, kids search to find the places in life where they can best fit in, feel accepted and make a contribution that counts. You will propel the children in your life toward a greater degree of success in life by helping them experience the ABCs of self-esteem—acceptance, belonging and competency.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Think of people in your life who accept you for who you are rather than for what you do. What is it that they do or say that makes you feel accepted by them? Give examples.
2. In your opinion, what is the difference between belonging and popularity? Do you think that too much emphasis is placed on popularity? Why? Discuss the effects that popularity and the need to belong have on students today.
3. Refer to the example of Kara and Max and their adjustment to a new school. What might their parents or teachers have done to make their transition easier? Think of some children you know who are making a difficult transition right now.
4. An important ingredient of self-esteem is competence. How can you help your children develop competence? Share some specific ideas.
5. What are some things a group of new students in a classroom might have in common with a blended family? Discuss ways a teacher might apply the guidelines for blended families in the classroom.

NOTE: For more on the topic of the blended family, read Dr. Leman's book *LIVING IN A STEPFAMILY WITHOUT GETTING STEPPED ON* published by Thomas Nelson.