

# **Self-esteem: The Cause and Effect of Success for the Child with Learning Differences**

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The concept of self-esteem has become the topic of much debate in educational and psychological circles in recent years. A virtual movement and several "cottage industries" have sprung up in response to this debate. As a result, the critically important concept of self-esteem has become the object of both ridicule and adoration. Confusion reigns!

The seminal question in this "tastes great/less filling" debate is simply this: "Does competence build self-esteem or does self-esteem build competence?"

I feel that the debate is a fallacious one because **both** sides of the argument are correct. A dynamic relationship exists between self-esteem and skill development. It is a relationship wherein one side of the equation increases at a parallel rate to the other side. As a child improves in self-esteem, his academic competence increases. And as that competence increases, his self-esteem improves. The caring and concerned caregiver must come to realize that positive self-esteem is both a **prerequisite** and a **consequence** of academic success.

Self-esteem is commonly defined as the belief that a person is accepted, connected, unique, powerful, and capable. Self-esteem issues take on a particular significance for students with learning or attention problems because self-assessment of this concept requires the ability to evaluate and compare. These are two skills that are extraordinarily challenging for students with special needs. Therefore, these children are often unable to accurately measure or assess their own self-esteem.

Because self-esteem is a feeling - not a skill - it can only be measured by observing the way in which a person acts or behaves. Teachers and parents must become keen and insightful observers of children in order to assess their self-esteem.

Students with **high self-esteem** will:

- Feel capable of influencing another's opinions or behaviors in a positive way.
- Be able to communicate feelings and emotions in a variety of situations.
- Approach new situations in a positive and confident manner.
- Exhibit a high level of frustration tolerance.
- Accept responsibility.
- Keep situations (positive and negative) in proper perspective.
- Communicate positive feelings about themselves.
- Possess an internal locus of control (belief that whatever happens to them is the result of their own behavior and actions).

Conversely, students with **low self-esteem** will:

- Consistently communicate self-derogatory statements.
- Exhibit learned helplessness.
- Not volunteer.
- Practice perfectionism.
- Be overly dependent.
- Demonstrate an excessive need for acceptance: a great desire to please authority figures.
- Have difficulty making decisions.
- Exhibit low frustration tolerance.
- Become easily defensive

- Have little faith in their own judgment and be highly vulnerable to peer pressure.

We would all do well to be mindful of the sage words of Great Britain's classic Plowden Report: "The best preparation for being a happy and useful adult is to live fully as a child."

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