

Visit With The Utays

May 2001

*School Psychology and Education Specialists
Reprinted from Northern Connections*



Dr. Joe Utay, a graduate of Pitt, has been a counselor, psychologist, family therapist, author, national speaker, teacher, clinic director and father. He earned tenure as a professor training school counselors, marriage and family therapists, and school psychologists; and is now Director of Counseling and Evaluation Services for Total Learning Centers. Dr. Carol Utay, also a graduate of Pitt, has experience as a Principal, teacher, computer trainer, national speaker, adjunct professor, author, and mother. With a doctorate in education, she has trained thousands of teachers and parents to help children achieve success and feel good about themselves. She is Executive Director of Total Learning Centers. Joe and Carol live and work in Wexford with their daughter Andrea.

Two Effective Methods to Raise a Child's Self-esteem

My son tells me he's stupid. The teachers are great; they talk to him but he says they only say that to make him feel better. At home, we praise him as often as we can. What else can we do?

Odd as it may seem, in some ways, parents place too much emphasis on praise. Children may become dependent on praise and then never develop an inner sense of, "They teased me, but I'm okay with how I look," or, "Others can do it faster, but I'm happy I broke my old record." Everyone agrees positive self-esteem is good. Praise though is but one of two ways to accomplish it. The other is giving children opportunities to be proud of themselves.

In general then, there are two ways of building self-esteem. One focuses on praise: encourage efforts during and praise accomplishments after. However, do not **just** say nice things, add proof. For example, "I noticed your friend really wanted to have a turn at the computer game and you very calmly finished your turn and gave it over to him without getting upset or arguing. Someone less smart might have let it get to them." That is better than, "You are such a smart boy." The most effective self-esteem enhancing praise is the comment that gives proof of the action deserving praise.

Now the other, and we feel more useful way to build self-esteem. Set up ways for your child to achieve something meaningful. The harder the task the better they will feel when they reach their goal. That does not mean drop them off at the base of Mount Everest, point upwards, and pick them up a week later. It does mean encourage, support, and help them reach meaningful goals. Afterward, you can honestly say, "I imagine you are very proud of yourself" which is more powerful in growing a child's self-esteem than, "You did good."

Feeling stupid often comes in two forms: "I am stupid" and, "I am stupid with (something specific)." Find out which it is for your child. If it is something specific, then your task is figuring out what it will take to improve the skill; correct an assumption; or practice alternative ways of thinking, feeling, or acting. It may mean something quick and cheap like a trip to the barber. It may mean tutoring or counseling within the school or at a local learning center. For children, adolescents, and often adults too, the more general, "I am stupid," is a cover for feeling stupid about something very specific that makes them feel generally stupid. Again, unearth the specific cause and help your child deal with it successfully.

Sometimes a parent's efforts at improving a child's damaged self-esteem is simply not enough, not due to lack of love or motivation to help, but rather lack of professional training in this area. Also, an objective outsider's perspective can be quite eye-opening.

So in conclusion, encourage and praise very specifically, support reaching meaningful goals, figure out if there is a specific cause to low self-esteem, then do what seems reasonable for the situation so your child can, in the end, feel proud of making things better. Finally, when in doubt that your efforts are sufficient by themselves, consult a professional. The entire process, moving from negative to positive self-esteem, while certainly not stress-free, will certainly help your child prepare today for success tomorrow – an accomplishment we imagine you will be proud of achieving

Please ask!

For more information and great websites visit the Total Learning Center website: <http://www.TotalLearningCenter.com> or call (724) 940-1090 for information or consultation (no charge, as always).