

## **It's all about Self-Confidence**

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***Today Contributor***

What leads to self-confidence when you're a teen girl? Is it volunteering experiences, befriending less popular kids, or involvement in sports leading to increased opportunity to make friends and to flow between various social groups? Or are feeling attractive (physically and personality-wise), socially (IM'ing others and hanging around with kids on the weekends) as well as being an insider to the latest relationship break-ups and make-ups more apt to set the stage for good teen self-esteem? Well, it's probably both. Suggesting to a tween or teen that social standing and popularity are unimportant will most likely be met with some commercial-grade eye-rolling. As adults we realize that what are important in the long run are friendships that can be counted upon, not just counted up. But kids often keep tally of how many people are signed up on their MySpace accounts and the number of folks who want to eat at their lunchroom table. Are these really important? Nope, but to a kid who has to exist five days a week within this kind of culture at school, these cannot be ignored. Teens have always and will always continue to worry about popularity—it's a normal preoccupation of adolescence. And I believe that parents need to be realistic, not rigidly idealistic in terms of expecting their teen to be able to rise above the power of social pressure. It really hurts to feel invisible at school, believing that if you didn't show up no one would notice. Or, to sit home with the folks on the weekend assuming that the other kids are having the time of the lives at the mall or the movies.

It's important for parents to realize that often girls need to first fit in on more superficial levels (clothing, hair style, and looking like each others' clone) before they can begin to feel comfortable displaying their individuality. When a teen feels socially secure she is no longer as distracted by anxiety. Chances are that she'll then have the guts and the focus to be able to take stands on issues such as animal rights, politics or promoting diversity as well as to whole-heartedly join clubs, to volunteer at the retirement center or to befriend kids who may not be as popular or comfortable within a crowd.

**Have a shy daughter who practically freezes when faced with entering a new group of kids? Suggest the following tips to help her to feel more at ease:**

- Ask other people about themselves—kids love to talk about their own interests, hobbies and successes.
- Use their first names as frequently as possible. There's nothing sweeter than the sound of one's own name, and it truly shows your interest in that person.
- Compliment friends' ideas whenever possible. Making someone else feel smart or important enhances their perception of you.
- Compliment a new outfit or hair style. Perhaps you'll receive a flattering remark in return!

- Watch your moods—no one wants to have to put up with a sour-puss who obsessively worries about her own feelings.
- Be easy to get along with. Don't sweat the small stuff (which movie to see), and be dependable. If you say that you'll meet for lunch, be there.
- Don't gossip. No matter how tempting, it tends to come back to haunt you.
- Watch the negatives. Criticism tends to get back to that person, and it can be easily distorted and blown out of proportion.
- Be the friend that you would like to have. Plain and simple.

**To best set the stage for your teen's journey through adolescence, parents should consider the following:**

- Try to *understand* how your teen girl feels, perceives and defines her world even if you disagree with her perceptions. Understanding does not mean agreeing.
- Endeavor to remember how being fourteen years old was for you (luckily I've kept an old diary and it confirms many of my not so fond memories—mostly of loneliness or feelings of rejection).
- Become informed about today's teen girl culture (what's cool, what's not), issues (boyfriends, sexuality, substance usage) and communication tools (MySpace, instant messaging, cell phones).
- Understand your daughter's self-absorption—it's not necessarily selfishness, she needs to feel confident before she can begin to put family into proper perspective.
- Foster your daughter's involvement in activities, skill-development and interests.
- Don't diminish her angst—although perhaps silly to you, her hurts really do hurt.
- Learn about lunchroom politics that may be downright cruel and how little control your kid may have within this setting.
- *Understand* that thin is in, whether it's healthy or not. Again, understanding does not mean agreeing.
- Find and retain the guts to parent wisely, even though your teen girl may profess to hate you at the moment.
- Understand the lure of substance use and find out what you can do to better drug-proof your daughter.
- Learn to listen effectively even though the kid may be unreasonable, bull-headed, or just downright nasty.
- Set rules that are fair, clear, and attached to consequences that can be followed consistently.
- ... Promote a sense of spirituality—helping others, belief that we give as well as receive.
- ... Implement a family code of values focusing upon honesty, education, perseverance and healthy living.

**Is your daughter displaying concerns with body image? Consider the following:**

- Encourage physical activity. Athletics encourage the teen to focus upon her body more for performance than for attractiveness. Whether its team sports, lifting

weights or jogging down the block with the dog in tow, encourage movement. This helps to reduce anxiety and feelings of self-consciousness and depression, and it can jump-start the process of building muscles and trimming down.

- Offer practical solutions when possible. Some of the “self-consciousness” cannot be changed immediately—that gawky body just needs to catch up with itself, and the face will eventually grow into the nose by age seventeen! However, you can advise specific ways to help your child to look her best—by checking in with the dermatologist or orthodontist to help out with embarrassing acne or crooked teeth.
- Talk about body changes. Bookstores and libraries offer several selections for the tween or teen about “what’s happening to my body.” Also, books are often more accurate than is your memory in terms of what to expect when it comes to discussing changes during puberty and when they will occur
- Mention the gimmicks: Media idols really aren’t so perfect in person. Explain to your daughter that camera angles, lighting and make-up help the stars to look better than in reality.
- Be careful with flattery. Praise effort such as perseverance at school or persistence on the practice field. Watch out for “person praise” such as looks, intelligence or ability. Your praise helps your daughter to develop her sense of identity, and if it can extend beyond the physical to character, commitment and conscience she may begin to feel better about herself.
- Be flexible with the dress code. Realize that the clothing that your daughter wears often determines how well accepted she’ll be within her peer group.
- Avoid teasing. Even cheerful comments can harm a child’s self-confidence, “What a cutie you are—so petite, and look at that red hair—how unusual!” may not be taken well by tweens or teens.
- Consider a little “pick-me-up”. A new outfit, contact lenses, a makeover or new haircut can be just the thing to give your daughter the ego boost to get her through this tough time. But, back up the focus on appearance with interest, encouragement and support for other activities such as chorus, softball, chess club or band.
- Listen to peer pressure comments. As noted above, adolescents often live in a culture of cruelty where teasing is difficult to avoid. Often, your child will feel better just telling you about the criticisms or comments, and may seek your advice or suggestions. That’s okay—as long as she is talking about the situation she won’t feel quite as alone.
- Check your own conduct. Evaluate your own weight and body concerns and how you talk to your daughter about them. Instead, talk about health, exercise and nutrition when it comes to your own body—not about weight, calories or dress size.

