

## SELF ESTEEM FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH: BUILDING CONNECTION

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As parents and caregivers, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to support children and youth's mental health. "The way we relate to our kids day-to-day plays a critical role. What research demonstrates is that self esteem is strengthened in children who have patterns of secure attachment."

Dan Siegel, author of parenting books such as: *No-Drama Discipline*, *The Whole Brain Child*, and *The Yes Brain* suggests **children need to feel these four things**:

- **Seen** — this is not just seeing with the eyes. It means perceiving them deeply and empathically — sensing the mind behind their behavior, with what Dr. Siegal calls "mindsight"
- **Safe** — we avoid actions and responses that frighten or hurt them
- **Soothed** — we help them deal with difficult emotions and situations
- **Secure** — we help them develop an internalized sense of well-being

When kids have the security of attachment, they have the ability to regulate their bodies, to empathize with other people, and to balance their emotions. These skills enhance their experiences in the world and their ability to build healthy relationships: which continue to build self-esteem.

Gabor Maté, author of *Scattered Minds* and *Hold On To Your Kids* states: "a lot of kids are not getting the environment their brains require for their development. I am talking (about) the physiology of the brain and connections," says Maté. Dr. Maté suggests that as care-givers, we should strive to ensure that: "(Each) child feels seen, heard, understood, accepted, celebrated, received."

In Dr. Paus' University of Toronto study focused on understanding neurodevelopment in adolescence, found that regular family connection can promote "positive youth development" on the brain." **This connection can happen at the dinner table, walks at the park, board game nights or any other regular shared experiences.** These experiences can shape what Paus called:

**"The five Cs: connectedness, character, caring, competence and confidence."**

In addition, Maté suggests that "**children need to be celebrated**, cherished and affirmed for who they are as well as for the potential that exists within them..." Maté also says **children "need to**

**be received**”, which is an interesting word to describe what parents need to do. Matê states, “to me it means that parents need to ...be open to receiving all that children are extending to them.”

Being ‘open to receiving all that children are extending to them’ is a complicated thing, but it is essentially unconditional love, or positive regard. It is what we as caregivers and parents are all striving for, but knowing it is not only optimal, but essential to their development can only increase its importance to our day to day interactions with children and youth.

Additionally, after reading several parenting articles, I would like to share some common threads which resonate with both Seigel and Matê’s practices.

1. **Give children choices:** Allowing children and youth to make choices for their lives can increase confidence and reduce their desire to ‘please others’ when presented with options. Practicing making choices can increase their capacity to know what they want and express their desires.
2. **Allow room for mistakes:** Learning involves mistakes. This may mean broken items in your house, spilled food on the carpet, or losing something important like your car keys. If we allow room for these mistakes, and avoid blaming/shaming when these things occur children begin to learn from their mistakes, and feel confident rather than fear.
3. **Acknowledge and praise** children whenever possible. This could be an art project, or completing their chores. If children know they are appreciated and seen, they are more likely to continue these actions, which only builds their capacity and skills and self esteem!

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