

Sydney J. Harris

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The Making of Self-Esteem

Almost anybody you might designate as "difficult" — a trouble-maker, a braggart, a sneak, an alibier, a die-hard, an apple-polisher — suffers from the same deficiency.

All these people — and others like them — suffer from what the social psychologists call "low self-esteem."

Such people basically do not like themselves (whether they know it or not), are not satisfied with themselves, and seek to achieve gratification by manipulating the outside world, rather than be reforming their own personality structure.

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OF COURSE, IT CANNOT be done that way. No more than the miser can ever have "enough" money, or the glutton "enough" food, can the person with low self-esteem ever be satisfied with external arrangements. He is always seeking for more.

In fact, in his thorough-going study called "The Antecedents of Self-Esteem," Prof. Stanley Coopersmith of the University of California found that few of the objective norms we commonly associate with self-esteem are important. "Self-esteem is not related to height and physical attractiveness . . . and is only rather weakly related to social status and academic performance."

There is only a limited relationship between self-esteem and such indices as material wealth, education and achievement. This is why self-made millionaires,

college presidents and movie stars can remain lacking in self-esteem for a lifetime, no matter what their objective achievements. Privately, perhaps even unconsciously, they do not believe in their success, and it does not allay their deep-seated anxiety.

What gives a person high self-esteem? It is almost entirely the way he is treated by his parents as a child: "The most general statement about the antecedents of self-esteem can be given in terms of three conditions — total or nearly total acceptance of the children by their parents, clearly defined and enforced limits, and the respect and latitude for individual action that exist within the defined limits."

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THAT IS, CHILDREN ARE fortified for a lifetime with good feelings about themselves when parents have definite rules and values, but permit free individual expression and greater deviation from conventional behavior.

The "strict" parent fails by inhibiting freedom; the "permissive" parent fails by setting no adequate guidelines. The successful parent knows how to maintain a "creative tension" between these two extremes.

Nothing we can do for a child is more important than instilling in him or her a healthy sense of self-esteem; without it, no later success is gratifying, and no adult therapy is more than speculative.