

Building Self Esteem In Children With Autism And Asperger Syndrome

By Karen Simmons Children with autism have a much harder time with their self-esteem. They often perceive the constant correction of their behaviors and their social interactions as criticism. The frequent visits to doctors, or speech therapists, or OTs, the testing and the stream of interventions that we try with them can easily leave them feeling like they're under the microscope, a specimen that warrants investigation, a person who needs fixing.

Expressive and comprehensive communication also have a direct impact on a child's self-esteem. These are areas that do not come easily to children or adults with autism/AS. Understanding subtle jokes and participating in human interplay, actions natural to their neuro-typical peers, further increase their feelings of 'not fitting in' and erode their self-esteem.

Combine all this with the expectations of siblings and the all-too-frequent bullying interactions from many peers and it's easy to understand how devastated a child with an autism spectrum disorder can feel.

What can we do? It's critical for us, as family members, educators, and professionals to learn strategies and techniques! In our not-too-distant past, institutional placement was the standard intervention for people with autism/AS. While that is not the case today, we still encounter lack of understanding and appreciation for the unique qualities of the person with ASD. Everyone, especially these visual learners, need a constant reminder of how special they truly are. We must find ways to give them their own Teddy Bear (or dinosaur!) so they will feel "L.C.B." on their own.

It Starts with US

But how do we really build their self-esteem? It starts with us examining our own ideas of how we view children with autism/AS. We must believe in their value ourselves before we can ever change their minds. These kids know when we're faking our compliments or arbitrarily handing out encouragement because the therapy book says we should give 5 positive comments to each correction. It involves empathy, walking in their shoes, rather than sympathy; no one wants to be felt sorry for. Each child is a gift, with his or her own special qualities. We just need to look for these special gifts, tune into the child with our hearts, and bring their essence out.

It Goes on to Others

Knowledge is power and no where is it more powerful than in helping people better understand what it's like to have autism/AS. Explain autism to everyone involved with the child. This will increase their empathy and provide opportunities for genuine praise and encouragement. Explain autism to the child, too, when he is able to understand his disability. Who are we really kidding, other than ourselves, when we pretend a child does not have the autism label or we try to camouflage it? Who are we hurting? It's the child with autism who is hurt in the long run.

Go to conferences, read books, research and share information that takes into consideration the many sensory, social, behavioral and communication challenges faced by the child at his/her functioning level. Armed with this understanding of how the disability affects the child, you and others can better find ways to help him or her fit in.

Remember to teach extended family, educators, other parents and professionals all you can to help integration and provide a deeper understanding when trying to teach particular skills. Be intuitive when advocating for children and persistent in your approach, though not abrasive. Having a positive mental attitude, especially when advocating, helps others want to cooperate with us. After all, who wants to deal with anyone cranky?

Bridge the interactions between peers and the child with autism. Visually and verbally interpret what you think they both are thinking and/or feeling based on your own experiences when you were their age, and your understanding of autism.

By teaching others about autism, more people will become aware of this invisible disability. When people understand empathetically, they will more naturally accept the child with autism, as he is. This is often effective in reducing or eliminating bullying from peers, too.

Learn to correct behaviors by sandwiching the correction in the middle of positive feedback. For example, "Sammy, you are doing a great job cleaning your room. If you pick up the clothes over there it would look even neater. Boy, you sure are a good listener."

Be Positive!

Children with autism often times have an incredible sense of humor. I have to stop myself from laughing so my own son doesn't feel like I'm laughing "at" him, causing him to feel inadequate. Sometimes I'll even say "I'm not laughing at you, Jonny, I'm laughing with you."

Stress the positives! Look for the good in every child, even if you don't see it at first. Pretending to be Pollyanna can only help, but make sure you're genuine in what you say. Stress the good effort your child is making, if he hasn't yet achieved a goal. Show your confidence in his abilities by telling him that you believe he can succeed. Saying things like this that may not be 100% true initially will contribute to your child's trust and belief in himself, raising his self-esteem and encouraging self-motivation to continue trying.

Model a mental attitude of "things are great". Express yourself in the positive, rather than the negative. Kids with autism/AS are masters at copying what others say, so make sure they're hearing things that are good for them to copy! When we say, "you are great!" to a child often enough, he, too, will believe it and feel valued for who he truly is.

Encourage children to share their thoughts and feelings; this is so important and often sheds new light on existing situations. My son, Jonathan was temporarily removed from the bus after cutting the seat. At first we thought he was acting out, so we had him write an apology to his bus driver. When we read his letter, we discovered that he was being bullied by another student on the bus and that it had been going on for quite some time. We intervened appropriately. The other child was reprimanded and Jonny was taught appropriate methods of expressing his anger in the future.

Balance the Physical with the Mental and Spiritual

Like most people, kids with autism feel better about themselves when they're balanced physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Since they are often very picky eaters and gravitate towards junk food, it's important to try supplementing their diet. Also, provide regular physical activity, when possible, to relieve stress and clear their mind. Set the stage for success by acknowledging their achievements - however small - and reminding them of their past accomplishments. Keep their life manageable and doable, refraining from overwhelming them with so many activities that they become too challenged physically and mentally to succeed at anything. Provide choices to them frequently so they understand they have a say in their own lives and even let them be in charge sometimes. These are all great ways to build self-esteem!

Don't overlook giving them opportunities to connect with their spiritual side through religious avenues or by communing with nature. This can help them feel purposeful, that their lives have meaning and connected with their source.

A strategy that helped raise Jonathan's self-esteem, especially in overcoming his victim thoughts and feelings, was spiritual affirmations. Using affirmations took some time, but we found that it brought calm and peace to Jonathan and our family.

Dr. Jerry Jampolsky, author of *Love is Letting Go Of Fear* and founder of the Center for Attitudinal Healing, offers many principles I find helpful in teaching us to love ourselves, thereby enhancing self-esteem, both in ourselves and then with others. Some of his principles include:

" The essence of our being is love

" Health is inner peace

" Live in the now

" Become love finders rather than fault finders

" Learn to love others and ourselves by forgiving rather than judging

" We can choose to be peaceful inside regardless of what's going on outside

" We're all students and teachers to each other.

Part of Jerry's message is that by focusing on life as a whole, rather than in fragments, we can see what is truly important. His concepts, when embraced, positively affect how a child with autism thinks and feels about him or herself. Anger, resentment, judgment and similar feelings are all forms of fear. Since love and fear cannot co-exist, letting go of fear allows love to be the dominant feeling.

Look for the Miracles Daily, there are miracles and good things happening all around us. Learn intimately the challenges that children with autism/AS face in their everyday lives. Be on their team by tuning into who they truly are - unique expressions of divine light. Empower them to be themselves, perfectly okay with who and how they are. Do this by loving them for who they are now, today, not who you think they should become, after ABA, or speech therapy or learning 'appropriate' social skills. Consider that children and adults with autism/AS are wonderful beings here to teach us empathy, compassion, understanding and most importantly, how to love. Most importantly, do whatever it takes to include them in life rather than merely integrate their presence.

In genuine star sapphires there are tiny imperfections and inclusions that reflect light perfectly to form a star in the stone. Each child with autism is like this precious gem, unique in every way. Without the tiny inclusions, there would be no star. It is our job as parents, educators and professionals to "bring out the stars" in all of our special children by shining the light on their natural beauty. In so doing, we see their different abilities rather than their disabilities. And, then they will see them, too.

About the Author

<http://www.autismtoday.com/articles/buildingselfesteem.html> Karen Simmons is a mother of six and author of Little Rainman, a story of autism told through her son's eyes. Her most recent releases are "Peace of Mind for Autism" a CD to help instill calm in people with autism/AS or associated with autism, and "Surrounded By Miracles", a story told by loved ones about Karen's near death experience.

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