



RAISING
RESILIENT
TEENAGERS

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO TEENAGE SELF-ESTEEM & RESILIENCE

CHRIS HUDSON

Raising Resilient Teenagers

A Parent's Guide to Teenage Self-Esteem & Resilience

By Chris Hudson

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Spending the first 10 years of his professional life as youth worker, Chris worked with teenagers from all walks of life. He also dedicated significant time and energy helping parents and training adults to work with youth. Through his subsequent study and research, he has developed information and training resources to assist youth workers and parents as well as providing specialized coaching services.

Chris lives on the south coast of NSW Australia and enjoys spending time relaxing with his wife and daughter.

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Introduction

There are no guarantees in life.

This statement takes on a whole new level of meaning when you are a parent. Part of the profound mystery of parenthood is that deep, powerful, instinctive need we have to protect our children from suffering and hardship.

Our desire for their wellbeing eclipses the desire for own wellbeing. All around the world, throughout all generations, parents consistently sacrifice for the sake of their teens.

It takes many forms. Working long hours to pay for their education. Forgoing sleep to ensure they are safe. Spending hours in the car travelling to and from a seemingly endless array of activities. Paying for tutors, dentists, coaches, counselors, sewing costumes, managing teams, helping with homework, hosting sleep overs, and constantly cleaning up - parents will do just about anything for their teens.

We want our teens to be safe and happy – now and in the future. We want their existence to be better than ours and we put in a great deal of effort trying to guarantee it.

But the reality is there are no guarantees – except for those we wish weren't there.

Despite our hopes, prayers, and best endeavors the only guarantees we have are; no matter what we do our children will experience pain and loss, they will be disappointed in life, they will make mistakes, they will be let down, they will get sick, they will be miss out, they will be lied to, they will get sad, they will.... you get the idea.

Even though we long to give our children a life without hardship, we know it is impossible. We can't ensure they will have a life better than our own.

All parents can do is try to tilt the balance in their child's favour. Reduce the risks, create opportunities, provide some protection, and offer directions. As parents we would love to guarantee the result, but the best we can do is improve the odds.

Hardship and disappointment are unavoidable in life – even for our children. But success is not about the absence of setbacks; rather it is about being able to thrive in spite them.

That is what this book is all about – how can parents equip their teenagers to thrive even when life gets hard, as it inevitably will.

The quality of a child’s upbringing will determine their capacity to achieve in life. This seems like an obvious statement. And it is – sort of.

When people hear “quality upbringing” they often assume it refers to certain tangible environmental factors:

- Homes with reasonable to healthy levels of income
- Good schools
- Growing up in a ‘good’ area
- Healthy diets
- Sporting and artistic opportunities
- Quality health care
- Technology and educational resources

Children who grow up in ‘quality’ environments like this do have advantages over those without access to such things. To put it in psychology speak, the above are “protective factors” in relation to teenager’s obtaining positive and healthy development outcomes. In other words, teens with all this have a head start in life.

There is an endless supply of research demonstrating how teens that grow up in *disadvantaged* circumstances have less chance of succeeding in adult life.

But here is the thing- we all know stories of teens who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks who went on to do the most amazing things and live fantastic lives. Bookstores and DVD collections are littered with biographies of people who were born into tough circumstances and overcame. Business leaders, celebrities, authors, inventors, social crusaders, the list is endless but the plot is the same; adversity turned into opportunity.

For every success story about overcoming a tough childhood there is a corresponding story of missed opportunity and tragedy. People who came from good homes with good parents and loads of opportunity who were unable to

capitalize on the hand they were dealt finding the pressures of life overwhelming.

The quality of the circumstance plays a significant role in determining a young persons future – it does not guarantee it.

So, what is it that enables some teens to overcome obstacles that are insurmountable to so many others? And why do other teenagers who have opportunity aplenty end up living lives of despair and unrealized potential?

The answer to these questions, in part, is found in quality of their character, not the quality of their opportunities.

Circumstances will change, but character is constant.

What successful people have that enable them to thrive irrespective of their circumstance are character, confidence, and abilities. These abilities are not contingent upon giftedness, talent, beauty, or intelligence, but are skills, attitudes, and behaviours that are learnt and mastered.

Why do some people have these characteristics and others don't? Somebody taught them! Somewhere on the resilient person's journey somebody provided them with the capacity to live a resilient life. This person modeled, taught, and instilled values, beliefs and behaviours that were character defining.

The person who is best positioned to do this for your teenager is you, their parent.

As parents, you can't guarantee your child will lead a fulfilling life, but you can definitely tip the scales in their favour. You can change the odds by choosing to create a constructive environment, avoiding unhelpful patterns of communication, and learning how to coach your teen to believe in who they are and what they are capable of.

Parenting is choice. You can choose to be intentional, proactive, and constructive or you can choose to cross your fingers, react, and hope for the best.

How to Tip The Scales In Your Teen's Favour

If you are reading this book, you don't need me to tell you that parenting is a privilege. As parents, we are in a relationship like no other. There is no other

relationship in life where you have the opportunity and responsibility for shaping and molding another person to such a degree.

Parents can too easily underestimate the awesome responsibility and power they have.

As a youth-worker, I have worked with teenagers at both ends of the opportunity spectrum. I worked with teens who had home lives that were awful, surrounded by disadvantage and generational poverty. I also worked with teenagers who came from affluent homes, with committed parents, private schools and all the trappings that come with financial security.

I learnt two significant things working with such a range of teenagers. Firstly, there are happy, determined, and confident teenagers as well as teenagers who are miserable, downtrodden, and hopeless at both ends of the opportunity spectrum.

Secondly, I learnt that the most significant factor in determining how teens feel about themselves is the quality of care received from their parents (or primary care givers). It wasn't the intelligence, wealth, attractiveness, talent, marital status, or beauty of the parents that made a difference. Rather it was a parent's willingness to personally take responsibility for investing in the well being of their teenager.

By investing as a parent I do not mean providing the stuff that money buys, although there is nothing wrong with that. The investment your teenager will benefit from most is YOU. They need your time, your physical energy, your emotional energy, your wisdom, and your willingness to hang in there with them no matter what.

You can't outsource parenting. Sitting back and just hoping for the best does not help your teenager. What your teen needs is your attention, your assistance and your acceptance.

The reason I decided to write this book was for parents who want to make the investment in their teenagers, but need some guidance on how to maximize that investment.

This book does not provide shortcuts or magical formulas. Raising confident capable teenagers doesn't happen without investing time and energy. But for

parents who are willing to put in the effort, this book will help you channel your energy to gain maximum benefit for your teenager.

What is Self-esteem?

Put simply self-esteem is how an individual evaluates themselves as a person. It refers to what they consider their overall value or worth to be. Do they like who they are? Do they feel like a worthwhile person who worthy of respect?

It is possible to talk about a person having a ‘high’ or ‘low’ self-esteem. A boy who thinks he is worthwhile, has something to offer, and generally likes himself would have a ‘high’ self-esteem. While a girl who does not like who she is and considers herself to be worth less compared to most other people could be described as having low self-esteem.

As we will see self-esteem can be a tricky concept to nail down in terms of definition, but its presence and effects cannot be understated.

What is Resilience?

Resilience is the ability to successfully manage life by adapting to change and stressful events in healthy and constructive ways. It is the ability to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going if you have been knocked over. It is being able to see beyond the present adversity, adapt, and re focus on a future goal or destination. Resilience is a skill of survival.

Resilience is not a trait that some are born with and others aren’t. Essentially resilience is a combination of thought processes, behaviors, and skills that are learnt and developed over time.

Resilient people are those who possess the capacity to find a way to keep going through hard times. Employing a combination of constructive thoughts, positive attitudes, and practical skills, resilient people can absorb the negative events in life and adapt accordingly.

Self-esteem and Resilience

Self-esteem is the key building block for young people developing resilience. Numerous studies have demonstrated there is a direct relationship between healthy self-esteem and resilience.

But you don't really need science to make sense of the connection – there is something self evident about it.

Think about it; we all fight and work for the things we care about.

If I value myself and think I am worth something, I will be motivated to keep going when things go wrong because I believe I'm worth it. If however I don't think I am worth very much and believe I have nothing to offer then I am much more likely to curl up in a ball and give up when life gets hard.

Resilience is about having the skills and learnt behaviours to survive adversity and regroup. But in order to deploy these skills and behaviours young people need the right inner beliefs and attitudes. Teenagers need to believe they are worth the effort or they won't try.

You can't develop resilience without first building a healthy self-esteem. However, just having a healthy self-esteem doesn't necessarily mean a person will be resilient. Resilience requires skills and learnt behaviours as well as belief and attitude. A young person may have a positive sense of their own self worth but still lack the awareness of how to overcome the obstacles put in their path.

Young people need healthy, realistic, and positive beliefs about who they are. In order to thrive they need people to teach them how to overcome the bumps and bruises of life. As a parent, you are in a great position to help them develop both their self-esteem and resilience.

The relationship between self-esteem and resilience looks something like this:

$$\text{Self-Esteem} + \text{Skills \& Behaviours} = \text{Resilience}$$

This is why the book is divided into sections. The first part looks specifically at self-esteem and how you as a parent can nurture healthy self-esteem in your teenager.

The second section of the book looks specifically at resilience and assumes that the groundwork for developing a healthy self-esteem is in place or underway.

Authors Note

My experience of reading books like this is mixed. I usually learn things and get motivated to change something about myself. However, I can also feel overwhelmed or inadequate. The size of the task or the amount of change I need to engage in can all feel too hard.

There is a lot of information in this book. I have tried to include practical advice about what to and what not to do. The intent is not for every reader to instantly undertake or implement every shred of advice. Nor is the expectation that parents need to be perfect.

This is the type of book for you to work through at your own pace. Depending on your specific circumstance some aspects of the book will be relevant than some others. There will most likely be things you realize you can improve. This doesn't mean you are failing, it just means there is an opportunity to do better. None of us are perfect; just ask my family about me!

With this in mind, I have also written a workbook that can be used in conjunction with this book that provides exercises and practical tips on how to implement many of the ideas and suggestions to your particular situation.

WORKBOOK AVAILABLE AT

<http://resilientteenagers.com/rrtwrkbk/>

1. Understanding Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a complex mix of an individual's own perceptions, ideas, and attitudes about who they are. Every person's specific personality, background, and life experience produces a unique individualized awareness of who they are.

Simply put; self-esteem is made up of what we believe to be true about ourselves and how we feel about that truth.

What we believe to be true is based on how we perceive ourselves. These perceptions are formed via a myriad of inputs and messages we receive from a variety of sources. We pick up on messages, spoken and unspoken, imagined and actual, blunt and subtle. These messages come from those around us, those in our past, our imaginations, and from our own observations of ourselves.

How we feel about those beliefs and perceptions is a reflection of how we evaluate those truths. We place a value on various aspects of who we are. It's like we each have an invisible scale which we use to weigh up what we believe about ourselves and in so doing determine our worth.

The experts distinguish between *Self-esteem* and '*self-concept*' or '*self-confidence*'. Self-esteem refers to the more general and holistic assessment of self, while our self-concept or self-confidence relate to specific aspects of who we are. I might have self-confidence when it comes to playing sport, or have a positive self-concept in relation to my appearance, but these things do not necessarily equate to how I value or esteem myself as a person.

For instance, Jill might consider herself a good at mathematician – so her self-concept is that she is mathematically capable, or even gifted. She is quite confident when it comes to doing sums and equations. However, she may not like who she is as a person, despite being good at math. Jill has a realistic self-concept of her mathematical capacity, but it does little to contribute to her self-esteem, as she places no value on it.

It is widely accepted that an effective means to build self-esteem is to develop and improve a young person's self-concept across various areas of life. However this approach cannot be done in isolation, as it does not account for how a teen's background or environment shapes the way they evaluate themselves.

The main thing to take away from all this is that Self-Esteem is ultimately dependent on the understanding and beliefs of the individual. What you think of your teen may or may not correlate with how they think of themselves.

Perceptions and Evaluations

Self-esteem can be elusive to quantify because it is an outcome of the all the possible combinations of a persons **perceptions** and **evaluations** about who they are.

A perception is how we view something; in this case how we view ourselves. Perception is a very subjective process. How I view something and how you view the same thing may vary considerably. We have all encountered people in life who appear to have “inaccurate” or “distorted” perceptions of certain people or situations.

When it comes to how people view themselves inaccurate and distorted perceptions are commonplace. All of us to some degree have a biased or distorted view of who we are and what we are like. This is because our perception isn’t based purely just on what we observe with our senses, it is shaped by the various psychological and cultural filters we use to interpret what we take in from the world around us.

An evaluation is how we judge or measure something. In many cases evaluations are made based on some type of objective reference point, like a checklist or audit sheet. But when it comes to evaluating who we are as individuals, and our specific traits and characteristics, there is no simple objective measure we can apply. Therefore, evaluation is also a very subjective measure.

When used in relation to self-esteem evaluation refers specifically to how much “value” or “weight” is given by an individual to a certain aspect of who they are. Or to put it another way, evaluation refers to how important a person considers a particular characteristic to be in the overall picture they have of themselves.

It is the combination of these two very imprecise and subjective processes, perception and evaluation, that make self-esteem such a difficult concept to pin down and measure.

A persons self-esteem is based on how they “view” various aspects of who they are, and how much “importance” they give to it. Note this is based entirely on the

individual's interpretation and understanding, not what others may think or believe.

This impact of this concept makes more sense when we think of an actual example.

Sally is considered by those who know her to be an attractive young woman, yet she has low self-esteem and is very down on herself.

One possibility is Sally does not perceive herself as attractive. When she looks in the mirror she doesn't see what everyone else does. She doesn't see herself as attractive, but attractiveness is important to her when she evaluates who she is. So it could be that Sally thinks being attractive is important (the evaluation) but doesn't think she is attractive (the perception) hence it contributes to her low self-esteem.

The alternative reason could be Sally doesn't care how she looks. Her appearance doesn't make much difference in how she feels about who she is. She sees herself the way most see her; physically attractive. But it has little impact on her self-esteem, as appearance isn't important to her. In this case, she can see she is attractive (perception) but it makes little difference to her self-esteem, as she does not consider it important (evaluation.)

Sally's low self-esteem in either case is not purely determined by her appearance, but will be a combination of multiple factors. However, this example is to demonstrate how subjective and variable specific traits or characteristics are in determining a person's self-esteem.

This understanding goes some way to explaining why so many talented and successful teenagers who struggle with low self-esteem, while other more modestly gifted young people can have a healthy sense of self worth.

Of course evaluating self-esteem is never that neat or formulaic. The example merely serves to highlight the impact of both Perceptions and Evaluations in how someone's self-esteem is formed.

Your teenager's self-esteem is based on how they perceive and evaluate themselves and their world. As a parent, you will have a significant impact on your teen's self-perception. The exact nature and long term benefit of that impact is up to you.

Outcomes of Healthy Self-Esteem

A teenager with a healthy self-esteem has a positive sense of moving in the right direction towards a set of goals and aspirations that they have set up for themselves. They will have a valued sense of security and worth within themselves. They will also feel motivated and ready to face the consequences of their actions.

There is always a fine line between healthy self-esteem and over confidence. Parents must work on their teenager's self-esteem in a manner that allows them to cultivate positivity about their abilities while possessing the humility to accept failure as a part of life.

Healthy self-esteem requires having a realistic view of personal abilities and balancing the positive beliefs of actual competence with the acknowledgment of shortcomings.

A healthy self-esteem is not an overly inflated one. An overly inflated self-esteem lays the foundation of narcissism (excessive self-absorption, selfishness, and vanity). Teens with overly inflated self-esteem will experience deteriorating personal and social interactions. They end up incorrectly assuming the problems in their lives are caused by other people's failings and that they do not need to make changes to improve situations. They consider themselves as being superior to others around them and thus end up isolated from their peers.

Be careful not to confuse brashness and over confidence with a healthy self-esteem. Often those who are arrogant or loud have quite low self-esteem, and their brashness is how they mask it.

Following are a few outcomes associated with having a healthy self-esteem.

Willingness to Try

Teens with a healthy self-esteem feel capable of performing the tasks required to accomplish their goals in life. They consider challenging situations as new opportunities to try their skills at. This goal-oriented approach makes a teenager more confident and willing to strive for success in whatever they undertake.

Confidence in their abilities leads to greater chances of success in school, sports and co-curricular activities. Teens with healthy self-esteem are more likely to show persistence in challenging pursuits like completing higher education.

Research has shown that there is a positive correlation between academic motivation, self-concept and performance in high school. Healthy self-esteem does not generate better grades, but a healthy self-concept improves a teenager's confidence and willingness to try.

Success in personal relationships

In order to love and appreciate others we first have to be able to love and appreciate ourselves. Teenagers who have a healthy sense of their own self-worth are more able to appreciate and respect others.

Teenagers who possess a healthy self-esteem are more adept at being assertive in expressing their needs and opinions. This enables them to foster honest and healthy relationships because they are able to establish realistic expectations with others.

They are more inclined to communicate well with their peers and family, as they are possess a positive sense of their own worth and believe what they have to say matters.

Healthy self-esteem better empowers young people to successfully manage their relationships. A sense of self-respect enables them to appreciate and value those around them. Because of this, they are willing to work at their relationships.

They are more likely to abstain from negative talk and put downs in relationships. A sense of positive self-worth enables these teenagers to earn other people's respect and they think of themselves as worthy friends or partners.

People with healthy self-esteem have are better able to forgive when in close relationships than those who have lower self-esteem levels.

Enjoy a healthy social life

Teenagers with a healthy self-esteem feel they have attractive and positive attributes to their personalities that they can offer to others. They believe they are worthy of being loved and cared for. This encourages acceptance from family members and peers, and provides the foundation for the continual development of healthy social skills.

Teens with good self-esteem are more likely to be positive, and thus tend to have positive individuals in their social circle.

Outcomes of Low Self-Esteem

Teens who suffer from low self-esteem have a tendency to magnify their shortcomings and failures and ignore their achievements and strengths. They will be constantly apprehensive and doubt their ability to meet goals in life.

Low self-esteem can become a self-fulfilling cycle. When your teen doesn't feel good about who they are, they withdraw from people and put out unfriendly vibes, such as not looking people in the eye or not participating in the conversation. This kind of behaviour can appear cold and distant, and as a result, others will convey negative messages and signals. A teenager senses that people aren't being very friendly, and take this as confirmation they're not a very likeable or worthwhile person.

Problems with personal relationships

Consequently, low self-esteem can have a strong influence on interpersonal relationships. Teenagers who hold a negative view about themselves are more inclined to be unassertive in relationships. They will feel unable to express their true feelings and experience internal turmoil as a result.

When they interact with friends, they will constantly agree with them, lacking confidence in their own beliefs and opinions. Teenagers with low self-esteem agree with their peers in order to earn their friendship. They are constantly seeking some form of reassurance from peers because they have little self-belief. They get trampled upon and mistreated by others because they believe their rights don't really matter. Teens with low self-esteem are more susceptible to the negative effects of peer pressure.

Some young people will withdraw from social interaction due largely to their own sense of worthlessness and lack of social confidence. Such isolation can create additional issues beyond just low self-esteem.

Reluctance to try new things

Teens with low self-esteem fear the thought of moving out of their comfort zone to experiment with new things as they are more focused on the possibility of failure than any favourable outcome. The ability to head out and try new things plays an integral part in building self-confidence and reinforcing positive beliefs.

Teenagers such as this give up earlier when faced with difficult situations because they do not have confidence in their abilities. Their internal bias towards expecting failure undermines their desire to persevere and instead promotes giving up, or not trying, as default options.

Prone to poor mental health

Teenagers with low self-esteem are less likely to be happy. They are more inclined to struggle with problems such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

Because of their internal negative beliefs about their inadequacies and failings, teens with low self-esteem are often in a perpetual state of anxiety, especially in social situations. Some of the more common fears are:

- Something will happen that will prove their inadequacy.
- Humiliation or ridicule is never far away.
- They will be abandoned or rejected because they are not worth keeping.
- They will lose what little they have i.e. respect, success, popularity etc.

Go out of the way to feel loved

Young people who struggle to feel a sense of worth are prone to engage in behaviours either to feel worthwhile or escape from feeling worthless.

Seeking to find a sense of worth and acceptance through sexual encounters is a common among teens with low self-esteem, particularly for girls. Research shows that girls with low self-esteem are more likely to begin sexual activity at a younger age than girls with healthy self-esteem.

The desire to be loved combined with feeling ‘unlovely’ can compel young people with low self-esteem to reduce their weight and /or their food intake to be more attractive and loveable. The need to feel loveable combined with significant personal dissatisfaction can contribute to the development of eating disorders and unhealthy perfectionism in young teens.

Self-esteem Matters

The risks for teenagers of developing low self-esteem are significant, but those risks are lowered substantially when parents take a positive and active role in their teenager’s lives.

The benefits of having healthy self-esteem compared to low self-esteem cannot be overstated. The odds of your teenager avoiding hardships and overcoming struggles are greatly improved when they believe they are worthwhile to themselves and others.

There is no one who has more influence on their self-esteem than you do as their parent. The positive effect you can have on their journey through adolescence, and indeed throughout their lives, is HUGE!

The great news is it is not that hard. But it does require you choosing to be intentional about how you go about parenting your teen. The 'sit back and hope for the best' approach is not how you provide your teen with a great advantage in life.

2. Self-esteem & Adolescence

Self-esteem can be an issue at any age, none more so than during adolescence. It is estimated that half of all teenagers will struggle with low self-esteem at some point during adolescence.

The most significant drop in teenage self-esteem happens early on, often in the pre-teen years. As the interests and comforts of childhood are discarded, young people can experience discontent and anxiety. This loss of childhood is compounded by the physical changes associated with puberty. Changes in the body create a myriad of anxieties and uncertainties. With the onset of physical puberty common at 10 years old or younger (mainly for girls,) adult realities can collide with childhood perceptions and create a significant crisis of self-understanding and confidence.

The next noticeable dip in teenage self-esteem occurs towards the end of high school. As teenagers are confronted with the imminent end to school and the need to make big choices about life and the future, their view of their abilities and self worth are diminished. They can feel unable or ill equipped to cope with the demands or responsibilities of the adult world.

While these are the more common periods during which teenagers struggle with self-esteem, young people of all ages can struggle with self-esteem related issues. As we will see later in the chapter, a variety of issues can trigger self-esteem struggles.

The simple message is if your child is a teenager or approaching the teenage years, be on guard for self-esteem struggles.

Boys & Girls: The Differences

Male and female self-esteem levels differ during adolescence and for different reasons.

The most common difference is males tend to have higher levels of self-esteem throughout the teenage years – and well into adult life. When it does drop, a male's self-esteem will not drop as low as females, and similarly a male's positive feelings about himself are likely to be much stronger than a female's positive perception of herself.

A key difference between the genders is the effect that puberty has on how they view themselves. Adolescent females have greater dissatisfaction with their bodies than do males. For many girls the physical changes associated with early adolescence often coincide with significant drop in self-esteem levels (this is also compounded by puberty occurring during the transition from primary school to middle or high school). For girls the development of increased body fat and shape change can have a negative effect.

Body changes can also create relational problems for girls that in turn affect their self-esteem. Girls who develop early can become the subject of jealous taunts and social exclusion from other girls. Ironically, girls who develop later than their friends can also be the recipients of esteem damaging comments about their bodies, but for the opposite reasons.

Conversely, for males the increase in muscle and strength can have a positive effect. Being stronger and faster is a definite advantage amongst adolescent males and generates respect and admiration from peers. For boys who develop later a sense of being inferior to others because of their physical stature is a common cause of esteem problems.

Many teenagers defy these findings, and the reasons as to why some teenagers show little change in self-esteem while others fluctuate significantly are still not entirely clear.

We do know some key factors have been shown to be particularly significant in relation to teenage self-esteem.

Key Factors

Appearance

Physical appearance has been shown in studies to be one of the biggest predictors of a teenager's self-esteem. A strong correlation exists between teenagers who express dissatisfaction with their appearance and those who have low levels of self-esteem. The connection between a person's self-esteem and their physical appearance is not just an issue for teenagers— adult's self-esteem is also closely related to their perception of appearance.

For teenagers, girls particularly, the social pressures exerted by constant media messages about the perceived ideal body type can cause significant levels of

dissatisfaction about their body. There is an increasing body of evidence pointing to the negative impacts highly stylized and airbrushed images of celebrities have on how young people perceive their bodies.

Feelings of dissatisfaction and inadequacy about their bodies are common among young females in particular. Despite most teens knowing that celebrity images are airbrushed or altered in some way, a majority of teens consider these body types as the ideal to aspire for.

The problem compounded by increased anxiety regarding the changes that are occurring within a girl's body and the constant subtle and, not so subtle, comparisons to peers and others.

Social Stability

Strong relational and communal networks have been found to be important factors for teenagers who have healthy self-esteem. Having a strong bond with family, and feeling secure and loved definitely mitigate against low self-esteem. In studies done amongst teenagers from both upper and lower socio-economic backgrounds, strong family units were found to have protective benefits for a teen's self-esteem.

Of course, peers also play a pivotal role in adolescent self-evaluation. Teenagers use peers as sounding boards and talking 'mirrors' to provide feedback about who they are and what they are good at. Peer groups also provide a significant sense of belonging and self-worth for teens. To be rejected or bullied by a peer group, or to never be established within one, can have serious negative effects on a teenager's self-esteem.

Relationships with both family and peers play a substantial role in how a teenager views their worth as a person. During adolescence, both these sets of relationships change significantly. Consequently, there are countless opportunities for events to occur that have lasting impacts on a teen's psyche.

Significant Events

As already mentioned social stability is a key protective factor for a teenager's self-esteem. When an event happens that unbalances their social networks, it can have a dramatic effect.

The most predictable events known to cause self-esteem levels to dip is changing schools. Moving from primary to elementary school into middle school or high school, and then the later move from High School to university or college are both times of increased risk for drops in self-esteem levels

Events such as parents getting divorced or separating, the death of a parent or grandparent, moving to a new town or city, the death of a friend, the break up of a serious romantic relationship, or even the loss of a pet, can all create issues that may result in significant loss of esteem for your teenager.

The cognitive and emotional worlds of teenagers are changing quite dramatically due the natural processes of adolescence. It is common for young people to internalize traumatic events that happen and feel responsible or guilty for what has occurred. These feelings feed a sense of inadequacy and worthlessness.

Ability to Meet Standards

I remember as a youth worker attending a High School Council meeting and discussing a disturbing increase in the youth suicide rate within the local area. One of the suggestions from a local government member was to put up large photo's around the school of former students who had gone on to achieve success as a way of helping teens feel better about themselves. I was dumbfounded that he thought this was a valid suicide prevention measure. (I just hoped he had a better grasp of town planning and zoning issues than he did of youth suicide).

Can you imagine being a teenager racked with self-doubt, feeling you are not good enough for anything or anybody, and walking out of a maths test you have just failed, to be confronted with a larger than life image of a former student who is now a millionaire software developer. How would you feel? I doubt 'inspired' would be the word that comes to mind.

Teenagers are under constant pressure to live up to an array of standards and measures. They feel anxious, and expend significant energy trying to maintain the social standards expected by their peers. Teenagers also feel the pressure of achieving at school. For a significant number the pressure to perform in extra curricula activities such as sport, music, dance etc. can also weigh heavily on their mind.

Pressure from parents to achieve certain standards as a family member, student, and in what ever other pursuits they engage in can weigh heavily on young people. This pressure to achieve increases towards the end of high school as the need to get into university or the work force becomes imminent.

Such pressure is not always real. Teenagers are prone to being over sensitive and exaggerating reality in their minds. But pressure is pressure, be it real or imagined. A sense of constantly failing to make the grade will obviously be detrimental to a young person's self-esteem.

Negligence & Abuse

This one is obvious, at least it should be. Young people who are consistently subject to painful, harmful, and degrading treatment will struggle to have any sense of positive self worth.

If for whatever reason, your teenager is the victim of abuse obtaining some form of specialist professional help for them is highly recommended. This help will ultimately only benefit a young person if they are no longer exposed to the abuse and they have a loving and supportive network sustaining them through the recovery journey.

-----End of Free Section-----

To continue reading and learning about how to build your teen's self-esteem and resilience download a full copy of Raising Resilient Teenagers.

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