

Self Esteem in Children with Special Educational Needs

For many children with special educational needs, having a healthy self image and high self esteem is fraught with difficulties.

All too frequently children who have experienced special needs over a period of time come to associate themselves with their difficulties. In the same way that adults may define themselves by the work they do, so too children begin to label themselves as stupid or useless, or dyslexic, according to the dominant language around them.

Often supporting adults inadvertently lend weight to these negative images and growing sense of difference. Additional support within the classroom, over a prolonged period of time, can reinforce the perception a child has of their failure to be like other children. Within the classroom, children quickly recognize differences in ability, and will associate themselves with a peer group who they perceive to be 'like' themselves in ability, confidence or achievement. This may be very different from the class teacher's intended groupings. In extreme cases, a child may discover there is no dominant, or even minority, group to whom they belong, and their sense of isolation and difference becomes a very real and present factor in their everyday lives at school.

Sometimes the child will ask the question 'why am I different?' and in desperation, the response might be to explain in greater, more intricate detail, the faults or lack within the child that merits this additional and special attention. In acknowledging the child's need for explanation and understanding, and in cataloguing the differences and needs within the child, parents and supporting adults may become a party to affirming the child's already low self esteem and poor self image.

It may be more appropriate to consider, in such conversations, the uniqueness of us all, the individual qualities and talents we bring to this world. At the very least we need a balanced view that puts into perspective the many strengths, talents and qualities a child may have, against their particular and often, specific, difficulties.

In interviewing young people I always ask the child questions about themselves: what are their particular strengths; what achievements do they feel most proud of; where do they feel most successful; what do they enjoy most in their life. Sadly, many children will have difficulty responding. Some will even deviate and say 'I know what I can't do' as if that is somehow more pleasing, more what is expected. The comments will vary but always follow similar lines: can't do homework, can't spell, don't like/can't do maths, always forget things, always get told off...

It is always important for young people to have the biggest possible picture of their strengths, qualities, successes, uniqueness, and to have a very small picture of the things they may find more difficult. I talk about them maximising the positive and minimising the negative.

A healthy self image and high self esteem depend on all of us being able to put the big screen on the best of ourselves so that we can see ourselves clearly, as wonderful, talented members of our society. If we can do this as adults, we can help our children too.

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