



Of Primary Interest

In Praise of Butterflies: Linking Self-Esteem and Learning

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YOU ARE AMONG THE FIRST READERS OF “Of Primary Interest,” a new column written by members of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) and targeted to kindergarten and primary teachers. Working with and on behalf of primary teachers comprises a major part of the responsibilities of many NAECS/SDE members. *Young Children* is pleased to partner with NAECS/SDE to offer readers information to support their teaching practice.

— Derry Koralek,
Young Children Editor

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The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) works to improve instruction, curriculum, and administration in education programs for young children and their families. Of Primary Interest is written by members of NAECS/SDE for kindergarten and primary teachers.

ESPECIALLY IN THE EARLY YEARS of elementary school, children tend to judge themselves primarily on their perception of how the adults in their lives value what they do and how they behave. Teachers wield tremendous influence over this aspect of children’s development. Every comment or exchange, positive or negative, finds its way into a child’s self-assessment memory bank. Comments that support the child’s sense of competence are like deposits; negative experiences, withdrawals. No one expects only deposits, but there must be a healthy balance or the child’s self-perception “goes bankrupt.”

Self-esteem: Too much of a good thing?

Although the research is mixed, it is widely believed that a strong link exists between children’s self-esteem and their success in school (Baumeister et al. 2004). This belief has spurred an emphasis on the role of positive self-esteem in supporting children’s success in the early years of school. However, understanding the difference between high self-esteem and healthy self-esteem is important for the adults in a child’s life, especially the teachers.

Healthy self-esteem arises from a person’s sense of competence and a sense of worthiness grounded in respect for basic human values (for example, honesty, integrity, care for others). Children develop healthy self-esteem when adults responsible for them show them respect and care and support their attempts to try new things. “A strong sense of worthiness prevents competence from becoming arrogance by keeping the individual focused on basic values, and competence prevents worthiness from becoming narcissism by requiring good feelings to be earned, not given” (Reasoner 2004). Children with healthy self-esteem find satisfaction in their own efforts without the constant need for adult approval.

Healthy self-esteem can be high, but high self-esteem is not necessarily healthy. When a child’s self-esteem gets waylaid by arrogance and an inflated notion of what they can do, it is unhealthy and can lead to poor outcomes. Lately, more and more information shows that children who lead others into negative or dangerous behavior often have exaggeratedly high self-esteem (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell 2000).

Consider the lessons we can learn from the following story, which illustrates a common misunderstanding about how adults can support children's self-esteem:

An experienced teacher and mother of two young children shared her new insight about promoting children's self-esteem with a colleague: "I'm afraid I've turned Libby into a 'praise junkie.' It dawned on me when she brought her latest painting home from kindergarten. I told her I liked it, but she kept pressing me for more. Did I like the sky? Did I like the colors she picked? I realized she rarely does anything without looking for my approval. I decided maybe I should tone it down. I've started asking her what she thinks is good about her work. We even talk about ways she could do some things better. I try to make the praise more specific. Instead of saying it's a nice picture, I tell her she picked a beautiful color for the sky. I keep reminding her that I love her no matter what, but I do that quite independently of praising what she does."

Lilian Katz (1993) writes persuasively about the pitfalls of aiming for high self-esteem without considering the risks of self-absorption in "Self-Esteem and Narcissism: Implications for Practice." She describes worthwhile ways adults can support children's self-esteem, including providing children with

- an optimum mixture of acceptance, limits, and expectations concerning children's behavior and effort;
- activities that encourage children's curiosity about themselves and others;
- activities that support increased understanding and competence and opportunity to contribute to the work of the group;
- activities that offer children opportunities to make real decisions and contributions (as opposed to activities that are frivolous and cute);
- activities that provide children with real opportunities to become investigators of interesting topics; and
- opportunities to develop and apply criteria for evaluating their own work.

Strengthening the link between self-esteem and learning

In *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning* (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp 1995), the National Education Goals Panel proposes an additional developmental domain, *approaches toward learning*, covering a range of habits, attitudes, and learning styles that affect children's learning. Katz's list of practices for strengthening self-esteem bears a close relationship to the panel's description of children's dispositions as learners:

- their openness to and curiosity about new tasks and challenges;
- their initiative, task persistence, and attentiveness;
- their approach to reflection and interpretation;
- their capacity for invention and imagination; and
- their cognitive approaches to tasks.

Attitudes and dispositions associated with approaches to learning can all serve as tools to support healthy self-esteem. Children who believe they are competent will be open to new tasks and challenges and vice versa. Children who are confident will persist with challenging and interesting tasks. Confident children will be open to reflecting on and evaluating their own work.

Although children's approaches toward learning are influenced by predispositions that reflect gender, temperament, and cultural patterns and values, teachers can positively influence how children learn. Teachers can be more intentional in influencing children's learning styles. Try turning the five dispositions into questions and apply the questions to the lessons you plan and the materials you include in your classroom. For example, ask yourself,

How will this activity or material

1. encourage children to be open to new tasks and challenges?
2. strengthen children's initiative and persistence? Will it maintain their attention?
3. encourage children to reflect on and interpret what they are doing?

Does this activity or material

4. support children's inventiveness and stimulate their imagination?
5. enlarge children's cognitive approaches to tasks?

Not all of the questions will apply to every activity or material. Their purpose is to focus your thinking on whether an activity or material related to content areas and learning standards in the kindergarten/primary curriculum supports these broad aspects of children's development.

The butterfly connection



A useful way to think of the five questions about the approaches to learning dispositions (and thus healthy self-esteem) is to consider them in the context of planning for an extended science project.

Young children are inveterate investigators. Their questions about the world around them—and particularly about the natural world—reflect an amazing curiosity. Engaging children's interest in a science topic is an excellent way to help children experience success as learners and thereby strengthen their healthy self-esteem. Here, in brief, is an example of how to use the five questions, derived from the approaches toward learning domain, in planning a science project.

It is fall, and once again children find and bring to school various kinds of caterpillars. "How do we care for them?" "What do they eat?" "What are their names?" "Do caterpillars sleep?" Questions abound and interest is high. In the curriculum, it's time to cover the unit on change. What an opportunity! Investigating the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly is an engaging way to address change and several science standards as well.

Ask yourself the five questions during your planning process: A project on the life cycle of butterflies offers opportunities to encourage children to be open to **new tasks and challenges** (question 1). Some children have already demonstrated their interest by bringing in caterpillars. Now the challenge is to find ways to **strengthen their initiative and persistence and keep them engaged** (question 2). What about a group conversation about caring for the caterpillars—keeping them healthy and fed and their environment clean? Children can keep a journal to **reflect on and interpret** (question 3) what they see each day. Daily writing fosters their growing literacy skills. Make art materials available so that children can use their **imaginations** and be **inventive** (question 4) about what they think will emerge from the cocoons. Encourage them to ask thoughtful questions. Helping children ask their own questions **enlarges their cognitive ability** (question 5).

Summary

Kindergarten/primary teachers can use the five questions as a powerful planning tool. The questions focus on critical learning skills and dispositions children will need all of their lives. Employing these skills and dispositions will help children become more confident *and* competent learners. Being confident and competent are hallmarks of healthy self esteem.

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