



Building Your Child's Self-Esteem

by Dr. Bernard Franklin

Several years ago, my wife and I adopted a baby girl whose biological father is black and whose mother is white. When this high school girl got pregnant, her father gave her two choices: have an abortion or move out of the home. She moved out. This same father called her "pizza face" as she was growing up. Today, she admits that she has been looking for her father's love in all the wrong places.

So my 3-year-old adopted daughter is a daily reminder that my words and actions have great power to influence her self-esteem. She may face people who are insensitive to her racial background, or she may someday be rejected by her biological mother's family. I'm striving to give her a positive view of herself and prevent something similar from happening in her life.

One of our favorite things to say in our household is, "Who's the most beautiful little girl in the world?" She's my only daughter, and her name is the only right answer. I'll ask my sons that question, and they'll give the right answer, then I'll ask my daughter herself, and she knows the answer.

Question number two goes, "And who told you that?" "Daddy did," she'll say, or she'll tell me that one of her brothers told her. It may seem trivial and repetitious, but that's okay. I want to make sure she has plenty of reinforcement telling her she is loved and accepted. I want her to grow up believing that men who truly care for her are sincere and affirming. Too many little girls are growing up without a father's affirmation, and the only voices they hear come from men who only want to exploit them, like the vulgar and demeaning messages that the rap culture sends to women.

Self-esteem is the result of how children perceive themselves. It includes thoughts and feelings and a whole bank of memories-like mental video tapes-of how their parents look at them, touch them and talk to them.

According to a wide body of research, children with a high sense of self are more able to see themselves as they really are, and they make good decisions and cope positively with the frustrations and challenges of life. They are much less likely to become involved with drugs and alcohol, become sexually active, and do poorly in school.

Actress Halle Berry came to grips with the anger and pain of her fatherlessness following her divorce from baseball player David Justice. As she described in *Essence* magazine, her father failed to provide her with the kind of healthy, nurturing relationship that would have served as a foundation for her adult relationships with men. Her father left an innocent child feeling betrayed, unworthy and vulnerable. Years later, she carried that yearning for a daddy into her marriage, expecting her husband to fill the void.

Dads, we can build healthy self-esteem in our children. It's vital for both sons and daughters, but I want to especially focus on daughters because too many fathers try to avoid or deny the importance of that relationship.

Your child is never too young or old to be affirmed. A strong foundation should be poured at birth, increased during the toddler years, and allowed to set like cement so that it holds firm under any painful circumstances she may encounter.

Try these strategies to build your child's self-esteem:

- Give your child unconditional love based on who she is, not what she does. Express love over and over and over.
- Respect your child. Treat her feelings with the respect that you would want to receive.
- Praise your child for accomplishments and good behavior, and be less quick and harsh about pointing out inappropriate behavior.
- Communicate with your child. Be an accessible father. Allow your child to express ideas, feelings, and zany fairy tales. Listen and let your child know that she's important to you.
- Encourage your child to develop talents and build confidence.
- Be consistent in establishing and enforcing limits.
- Appropriately hold, touch, and caress your child, and don't stop when she starts to physically develop into a woman.

Remember, little girls need healthy relationships with their fathers so when they mature and hear a boy mumbling some inappropriate rap lyrics about women, they can turn their head, pop their fingers in the air, and say to themselves, "That's not what my daddy says!"