Self-Esteem and Prevention

The Importance of Self-Esteem

Feeling good about themselves is one of the best weapons people have to deal with life's ups and downs. Helping children feel good about themselves is one of the greatest gifts adults can give them. A child who has positive self-esteem will have an easier time resisting pressures to use alcohol or other drugs.

A positive self-image enables a person to be productive and respond to others in healthy ways. Positive, nurturing family relationships are important in fostering self-esteem. Parents can say negative things without destroying self-esteem. Negative messages, when delivered clearly and in non-destructive ways, help children learn how to behave. But negative messages must be directed at the child's actions, not at the child personally. For example, if a parent continually calls a child "stupid" when he makes a mistake, the child will come to think of himself as stupid instead of as a person who made a mistake. Name calling is deflating and hurtful, and can inflict life-long damage.

Self-Esteem in Young Children

Between the ages of one and three, children learn to think for themselves. This is the time for parents to set limits while allowing them to be creative and begin to make their own decisions. Routine activities at this age present great opportunities for praise.

Three to six year-olds learn who they are, how far their imaginations will reach, and what their boundaries are. Clear negative messages at this age teach children about potential dangers around them. Three to six year-olds need room to discover who they are in relation to the rest of the world. They are eager to help and should be given small tasks and chores. These activities give plenty of chances for positive messages and negative ones. It is the nature of children to push, to challenge, and to test rules and boundaries. This constant challenging can be exhausting for parents. As children go through this period, self-nurturing and outside support for parents become even more necessary. Children between 6 and 12 are well on the journey toward independence and responsibility. Families with children in this age group usually have many rules and will experience a lot of rule testing. Self-esteem messages for children are important and should include approval for the challenges and testing children initiate. It is not too early to educate children of this age group about alcohol and other drugs. Some children as young as nine have used alcohol and other drugs; children even younger are exposed to alcohol and other drug use by others. Helping young children develop refusal skills will enable them to say "no" to alcohol and other drugs when they are offered by peers, older children or adults.

Self-Esteem in Adolescents

An important developmental task of 13 to 19 year-olds is separating from the family. At this age, an adolescent is becoming an independent person, responsible for his or her own feelings, needs and behavior. The separation process can be extreme, sometimes taking the form of open rebellion. The adolescent may break every family rule to declare his or her independence.

Adolescence is when many young people are first confronted with the choice of using alcohol or other drugs. Alcohol and other drug use can lead to other problems such as delinquent behavior, adolescent suicide, and teenage pregnancy, all of which have a negative impact on the self-esteem of an adolescent. Parents must empathize with the confusion their teens are facing and help them grow with messages of encouragement and love.
Self-Esteem in Parents

Adults build self-esteem in the same ways they help build it in others. They can learn to give themselves positive verbal rewards for just being, trying and doing well. Parents should recognize that it is fine and healthy to seek help and support to get through tough times.

Parents who are adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) may have conflicting feelings in their roles as parents. They may suffer from low self-esteem because of negative childhood experiences resulting from alcohol and other drug abuse by a parent or other family member. It's hard for parents with low self-esteem to give positive messages to their children. In raising their own children, ACOA parents often try to increase their own sense of self-worth by being accepted and loved by their children. ACOA parents don't always recognize that their children may receive mixed messages from them and may experience the same problems of guilt, shame and low self-esteem that their parents experienced as children.

Self-Esteem in the Elderly

Self-esteem is an important issue for the elderly. Many older people face stressful situations such as the death of friends and family, deterioration of health and physical ability, loneliness or depression. Retirement sometimes creates feelings of not being a productive part of society and stress due to reduced income. Relocating after retirement adds other problems such as difficulty making new friends, depression and loneliness due to separation from family and friends. If self-esteem is decreased because of these stressful events, the elderly are more prone to abuse alcohol and other drugs to relieve their pain. The likelihood of abusing prescription medications also increases as people age.

Peer support can help elderly people increase their self-esteem. The elderly need to be treated with care and respect. They should be encouraged to participate in social and physical activities suited to their needs. Many problems of the elderly–alcohol and other drug abuse, depression and loneliness–can be avoided through greater social contact.

Self-Esteem in the Dysfunctional Family

High-risk youth have lower self-esteem and are more likely to engage in alcohol and other drug use than other youth. In an effort to cope with problems experienced at home and in school, youth engage in the use of alcohol and other drugs and exhibit inappropriate behaviors to gain acceptance by their drug-using peers. Family-based alcohol and other drug prevention efforts can help youth address problems and acquire necessary skills for coping with stressful situations. Chemically dependent parents are often the source of family dysfunction and create difficulties for family members trying to develop self-esteem. Parents who are using alcohol and other drugs create greater stress in the family, are less likely to spend time with their children, and generally do not encourage positive behavior. This often results in lowered self-esteem on the part of children and other family members.

Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse resulting from alcohol or other drug abuse further decreases the self-esteem of family members. Prevention and intervention programs can help the family acquire skills to handle the problems of alcohol and other drug abuse and the support necessary for the enhancement of self-esteem.

Conclusion

Positive self-esteem is a necessary ingredient for individuals to lead happy, healthy productive lives. Communication of feelings and problems is essential in the building of self-esteem. Family
members can learn decision-making and problem-solving skills that will help them handle stressful situations and prevent the use of alcohol and other drugs.