

Self-Esteem Challenges in Middle School

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In addition to being a therapist at BZA I am also a school social worker at a jr. high school. Whenever I meet new people and the topic of occupations come up, I usually get a common response of how dreadful and awful the middle school years can be. Most of us can recall how difficult those years were. Adolescents are trying to form their own identity while worrying about what everyone else thinks of them. There are so many added stressors such as getting good grades, finding the right circle of friends, and resisting peer pressure.

A common issue that I see involves adolescents struggling to maintain healthy self-esteem. It's even more of a struggle in current times when t.v., internet, magazines and advertisements send us messages about how we should look. With social media it's easy for teens to fall into traps of comparing themselves to others. When you see classmates posting pictures of friends in different fun settings it can be easy to feel left out. It becomes a popularity contest of how many likes a picture can get or how many followers someone has. Below are some signs of low self-esteem and some tips on how you can help as a parent.

Signs of low self-esteem

1. Your teen is overly critical of self
2. Constantly compares self to others
3. Difficulty accepting compliments
4. Social Withdrawal
5. Depression/Anxiety

What Parents Can Do

1. Be there for your kids. As parents we want to swoop in and figure out how to solve their problems, but most of the time just listening and validating their feelings is what they need in the moment.
2. Praise your kids for behaviors instead of outcomes. Instead of “Great job on getting an A on your test!” Try: “I’m so proud of you and your good work ethic. I saw all that studying you were doing and it really paid off.”
3. Value your kids as the individuals they are and avoid comparing them to siblings or peers. Even if your child struggles with school, recognize their strengths and create opportunities for them to nurture those talents.
4. Encourage your child to pursue at least one extracurricular activity. This is a great way for shy teens to meet friends with others who have common interests.
5. Model healthy self-esteem for you child. Acknowledging that you make mistakes and that life doesn’t always go your way shows your kids how to be resilient instead of internalizing negative events. “I’m disappointed I didn’t get the promotion at work, but I know what I’m going to work on and I’ll try again next year.”
6. Encourage healthy body image and healthy habits. If your teen is fixated on an ideal weight to try to shift his/her mind set to adopting healthy eating and exercise habits.
7. Have dinner as a family as often as possible. Have each family member discuss the high point and low point of their day. Ask your teen open ended questions to get the conversations flowing.
8. Take a social media vacation. Explain to your teens that this is not a punishment, but more of an opportunity to live in the moment. Have the whole family partake in having technology-free days(or for a couple hours a day as a small step).

Therapy can also be helpful for individuals with low self-esteem. Therapists help clients identify unhelpful thought patterns with positive and healthy thought patterns, practice assertive communication, and using coping skills to lead a happy and productive life worth living.