

## **The Importance of Your Child's Self-Esteem** by Steve Danzig, LMSW-CC, LADC, CCS

New research published in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Substance Abuse* (Volume 15, Number 2) by a group of Florida sociologists suggests that low self-esteem and peer approval of drug use in boys at age 11 predict drug dependency later in their lives as young men at age 20.

The study found that boys with very low self-esteem were 1.6 times more likely than other boys to meet the criteria for drug dependence nine years later. They also found that early drug use is an important risk factor in drug dependence. The odds of drug dependence among early drug users were 17.6 times greater than among those who had not tried drugs by age 13.

To test low self-esteem, the boys were asked to rate the truthfulness of various statements, such as "In general, I feel I am a failure" and "I don't like myself as much as I used to." They were also asked to rate the level of approval their close friends had for people who smoked marijuana or cigarettes, used cocaine, or drank alcohol.

Dr. John Taylor of Florida State University, one of the researchers, said "Low self esteem is kind of the spark plug for self-destructive behaviors, and drug use is one of these. It's a fundamental need to have a good sense of self. Without it, people may become pathologically unhappy with themselves, and that can lead to some very serious problems."

The findings of this study confirm our own common sense. When we feel good about ourselves, we make good choices for ourselves. When we do not feel good about ourselves, we often make bad choices by seeking quick fixes to make ourselves feel better. Part of a parent's job is to help build their child's self-esteem. This is important for both boys and girls. While this particular study indicates that boys' low self-esteem may lead to later drug dependence, other studies have indicated that low self-esteem in girls typically manifests itself in depression and eating disorders which are also dangerous, destructive behaviors. How do you know if your child has high or low self-esteem?

A child with HIGH self-esteem:

- thinks he/she can succeed
- thinks he/she is nice looking
- thinks he/she is fun to be around
- is not afraid to take chances
- believes in him/her self and likes him/her self
- feels safe and is free to express his/her feelings

Tips on building your child's self-esteem:

- Reward children. Point out the good things they do, don't dwell on the bad. Accept both their successes and failures
- Use phrases such as "I'm so proud of you" or "Thank you for helping"
- Have reasonable expectations. Don't expect too much too soon. Help set reachable goals.
- Never make fun of or "put down" your children. Don't judge them and make them afraid to tell you how they feel. Discuss problems without putting blame on anyone.
- Define limits and rules clearly, and stick to them! But be flexible when you need to.
- Be a good role model. Let children know you feel good about yourself, too. Don't let children hear you say bad things about yourself.
- Give your children responsibility. They will feel useful and valued.
- Let your children help make choices. Include their opinions and decisions along with yours.
- Be available. Support your children and be there when they need you. Spend time together. Share favorite activities.
- Go to your children's events at school and show them what they do is important to you.
- Show how much you love them just for who they are. Tell them you love them often. Give them lots of love and hugs.

If you suspect that your child is suffering from low self-esteem and/or is using drugs and alcohol, there are therapists specializing in adolescent mental health and alcohol/substance abuse issues and treatment that can help you.