

GUIDE 6. DEVELOPING SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is closely linked to achieving positive social interactions. Due to other people's reactions to visible difference, young people with visible differences often struggle to achieve a good and enjoyable social flow. In addition, almost all young people have some concerns about appearance and gain reassurance from a shared style and a sense of belonging among peers. Students with a visible difference are particularly vulnerable to missing out on this peer support, but it is hard for any student with low self-esteem to gain as much as they should from school, both socially and academically.

Because of the link between self-esteem and positive social interactions, it is important to address low self-esteem alongside a programme to improve social skills. See the Guides on [Having something to say](#) and [Practical support with social skills](#).

Low self-esteem is often a factor underlying challenging behaviour. The behaviour can seem merely to make everything worse for the student themselves as well as for everyone around. But, from the viewpoint of the student, this challenging behaviour may be the only thing they can come up with in a desperate attempt to disguise or remove an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, incompetence etc.

Low self-esteem creates a vicious circle – challenging behaviour leading to negative responses from others and less social opportunity, leading to even lower self-esteem leading to more difficult behaviour and so on.

You should also beware of the very quiet young person with a visible difference. They may struggle to participate and although they may not present any challenging behaviours, they may be experiencing very low self-esteem and anxiety.

1 WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Quitting: Failing to engage in tasks sufficiently to be able to achieve anything (e.g., being careless and rushing to complete a piece of work, giving up because it's 'boring', giving an answer that they know is wrong rather than trying and risking failure).

Avoiding: Quitting even before starting a task. May reject the task in a surly way, or more subtly with plausible excuses, such as "We did it last year, Miss."

Cheating: Altering or dodging the rules, explicitly or privately. If challenged, protesting innocence, appealing to reason, or accusing the challenger.

Clowning or regressing: May be trying to get attention for something of their own choosing (i.e. that they have control over) instead of their appearance which they cannot control. Clowning may also serve to deny or diminish the seeming importance of a task.

Controlling: Attempting to dictate to others which may come across as interfering or bossy or patronising.

Aggressive and bullying: Seeking to belittle, hurt or scapegoat others.

Passive Aggressive: Agreeing or even offering to do something but does not follow through. May say "I forgot" or "I had to do something else." It leaves you feeling let down.

Denying: Dismissing the importance or value of something (e.g. if not selected to go on a school trip "I didn't want to go anyway" or in the run-up to exams "Qualifications are a waste of time").

Rationalising: Making excuses for poor performance rather than accepting responsibility, especially by blaming other people or events beyond their control.

To onlookers, all these coping strategies are clearly counter-productive, and will never help the young person to feel more worthwhile or to achieve greater social acceptance. But they originate in the need to try and manage a sense of failure or imperfection. Consequently, as teachers, the best way forward is to find opportunities to be positive and build self-esteem rather than to tackle and eradicate these symptoms of low self-esteem through punishment or target setting.

2 STRATEGIES FOR REPAIRING SELF-ESTEEM

The strategies outlined below are most effective when the student experiences them consistently over several months throughout the school day and also at home. It is important therefore to involve parents/carers if possible, when establishing a self-esteem building programme.

Low self-esteem brings with it an increased tendency to amplify every negative experience and comment while diminishing or discounting positive messages from others, such as by destroying work which has been praised, or by thinking – and often saying – “you’re just saying that” (implying that it isn’t true) if a member of staff gives positive feedback.

Make everyone welcome

When forms or year groups choose teams, for example, or break up into small groups for a learning activity, it often happens that a certain student or students are the last to be chosen and are clearly not really wanted on anyone’s team. It is essential to avoid subjecting any young person to this extremely hurtful experience by ensuring that all students are allocated to teams or groups by the person in charge.

Organisation of assemblies, lunchtime seating arrangements, outings, duty rotas, etc. should always be considered in terms of the likely effect on the self-esteem of a student who is struggling to feel accepted. Make sure that everyone is included in these activities while also being careful not to make a student special – or patronised – by giving them too many special jobs to do.

Mistakes are just information

Establish a learning environment where students don’t need to guard against mistakes or failure. ‘Making mistakes’ is best seen as a chance to learn and do something differently next time. Staff can model this by being open and relaxed about their own experience of getting things wrong and even ‘modelling’ getting things wrong.

Separate actions from people

Always make a clear distinction between what your student has done or is doing and them as a person. Ideally combine your concern over an unsatisfactory outcome with a more positive comment about the young person themselves.

Never give students nick-names or negative labels - not even in your thoughts!

Keep strengths in the picture

Most people’s confidence varies from one situation to another. When facing a particular challenge, it can help make a link to something we feel more sure of.

Thoroughly get to know your student’s temperament, interests and aptitudes. If some members of staff find them less challenging in their lessons, or achieve more positive outcomes with them, find out more about the strategies they employ. Remember how important it is to build a positive relationship, even though this may seem quite time-consuming at first.

"Okay Ruby, you look like you've got some spare energy. Maybe you'd be kind enough to hand these books out? Thanks."

Ensure tasks are do-able

Pitch tasks at the level your student can manage – neither over-protective nor too demanding. If you're not sure, check: "Are you okay showing these visitors round on your own or would you like to go with someone who's done it before?"

Give positive feedback often but carefully

As mentioned above, positive feedback can be difficult for a student with low self-esteem to receive. Such feedback will be more effective if it is clearly linked to a specific and practical instance, if it is low-key, and if you can give it the quality of making an observation rather than of 'praise'.

"You have a real eye for colour." – while looking together at a piece of work or display.

"Those poor plants do need someone to pay them some attention – thank you for watering them."

Create choices

Provide opportunities where your student can choose between clear, manageable alternatives.

"Do you want to use the computer for this or just write it by hand?"

Link action to results

Create clear, firm guidelines and carefully delineated manageable targets with real, consistent consequences. The school ethos and behaviour policy will be important here. But make it more 'real' for your student by agreeing practical and achievable goals, and sharing your monitoring of progress.

"Mrs. Betts and Mr. Khan are both pleased with your homework, but Miss Hall says she hasn't had anything in from you yet. Is there anything I can help with?"

Regular, well-informed reviews are crucial, not only for staff to monitor a student they're worried about, but very importantly to help the student to see how their own decisions and actions are making a difference. Try to involve the student as much as possible, so that can see that they are being treated with respect and are being listened to.

Case study

Mateo had been scalded as a baby with scarring to his head, noticeably sparse and uneven hair growth and the loss of most of his left ear. He had often been described as 'a handful' but also a 'good worker'. However, in secondary school Mateo became gradually more challenging in class. Incidents were becoming more frequent in unstructured time. Staff were perplexed to note that these often appeared to follow a good lesson when Mateo had been complimented on his work. Towards the end of Mateo's fourth term in secondary school, his mother contacted the school: his occasional outbursts towards his younger sister had become more frequent and more serious, and she herself had caught him being cruel to both their cat and his rabbit. Mateo's mother felt that this was somehow 'caused' by her trying to get him to do his homework. She was also concerned that, over the last year, her son seemed to have fallen out with everyone he had transferred with from primary school, but had not made any new friends.

The head of year called a meeting of all the staff involved with Mateo. Staff generally described Mateo as immature, idle and a constant source of distraction and irritation to others, although his Geography, CDT and Maths teachers viewed him more positively.

The staff were given information about living with a visible difference and the Year 8 form tutors agreed to run some PSHE sessions on social skills, self-perception and on strategies for fielding teasing and inappropriate remarks about appearance – such ‘teasing’ was felt to be a problem for many of Year 8 including Mateo.

A list of *do’s* and *don’ts* was drawn up for staff to follow when working with Mateo. For example:

- Do ask for headings to be underlined and for work to look smart.
- Don’t press for correct spellings at present.
- Do set drawing/diagrams/labelling/one-word answers/multiple choice homework.
- Don’t set written homework for the time being.

Progress was reviewed once a month after the Year 8 team meeting, and regular meetings were held with Mateo and his mum.

Improvements were slow to materialise at first, but after the PSHE sessions there was a noticeable shift away from appearance related jibes among Year 8 generally. In due course Mateo was heard to answer a student who asked to borrow a comb, with the question “And your point is?” (See *Fogging* in the Guide on [Teasing, name-calling and bullying](#)). Jamie’s mum reported improvements at home before anything was obviously happening at school, although Mateo wrote up his rabbit hutch building exploits at some length for an English assignment, including several photographs. Mateo also felt that things were improving, and that staff were now listening to him more. After the PE team took a small group to see an under 18s football game between Manchester United play Aston Villa, Mateo formed a positive friendship with a well-motivated student in another form. As year 9 approached, staff were considering whether to move Mateo or the other young person, so that they could be in the same tutor group.