The Trouble with Being Special: Starting a New Conversation About America's Children

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The Self-Esteem Trap

"You have to be sensitive to the fact that other children are inferior to you."
The Self-Esteem Trap

- Obsessive self-focus.
- Restless dissatisfaction.
- Pressures to be exceptional.
- Unrealistic fantasies of wealth, power, celebrity or achievement.
- Unreadiness to take on adult responsibilities in an imperfect world.
- Feelings of superiority and/or inferiority.
- Excessive fears of being humiliated.
Jean Twenge’s (2006) Research on 1.3 million Americans:

“Born after the self-focus entered the cultural mainstream, this generation has never known a world that put duty before self.”

The Gen’Me includes those people whose birthdays fall between the early 1970’s and the present: from adults now in their 30s to grade-schoolers and toddlers. They are all marked by this cultural change: they believe they are “special” and should accomplish something extraordinary or they have failed.
America’s newly identified at-risk group for high levels of emotional disorders – especially anxiety and depression – are preteens and teens from affluent families (those earning $120,000 per year and more).

These are families where parents have idealized their children and unknowingly fail to lead their children into adulthood or expect their children to handle the ordinary difficulties of everyday life.

Current studies suggest that 30 to 40 percent of 12-to-18 year-olds from affluent families are experiencing disturbing psychological symptoms.
What happens to you if you repeatedly ask yourself, as a teen or young adult:

- “What I am best at?”
- “How can I be extraordinary?”
- “What’s unique about me?”
- “What is my bliss and how can I follow it?”

**SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS** — which distracts from

- Concentration
- Mindfulness

Self-consciousness takes us away from present-moment awareness into anxiety and rumination about ourselves. We need self-consciousness for certain kinds of self-guidance, but not as a steady diet.
More than 2500 years ago, the Buddha wisely taught that it is the nature of our life to be unsatisfactory. Discontent is guaranteed because everything here is constantly changing and so, we can never find solutions that are lasting. And we all eventually get sick, grow old and die – if we are lucky – or we die prematurely, if not.
Whoever you are, and whatever you do, bad things will happen to you. It’s not a personal issue that you meet with obstacles and failures and mistakes. If you learn early and well that you can face adversity with hope and a desire to learn from your shortcomings, then you are better prepared for happiness and joy than if you become excessively self-conscious every time you win or lose. Self-consciousness keeps us from learning from adversity and remaining interested in our lives.

If you can learn from adversity, (1) you’ll never be bored; (2) you’ll find that everything teaches you and nothing offends you.
The Self-Esteem Trap

Your life, my life, our lives are relationships in which we have to guide ourselves skillfully in our actions and our speech.

Two means of escaping and avoiding the Self-Esteem Trap:

**INTERDEPENDENCE**

Relate to others with a kind and caring manner because you will always need them, no matter how smart, creative, famous or wealthy you are.

**AUTONOMY**

Know how to work with yourself to make decisions, be responsible, and resolve with conflict and adversity.
Mistakes of I'm Okay / You're Okay Parents

- **Laissez-Faire** – I want to be my child’s friend, not an authority figure or leader; I want to stand up for my child and protect her/his ego and self-esteem; I want to admire my child; I expect my child to become a unique and special **Individual**; I’ll be an authority figure, but I’m reluctant to exert power.

- **Helicopter** – I want to be my child’s best friend and rarely have conflicts or negative feelings; I want to follow my child’s lead in her/his interests and ideas so that she/he can discover exactly how to express individual talents; I think my child is often wiser than I; I see myself more as a guide or advisor than an authority figure for my child.

- **Role-reversal** – I want my child to be my best friend and I’d like to be her/his best friend, too; I want my child to lead the way on discovering our life together; I feel that my child is superior to me in many ways and wouldn’t want to impose my leadership unless it’s absolutely necessary.
Cure for the Self-Esteem Trap in Parenting

X-TREME PARENTING MAKEOVER

1. YOUR KID IS NOT KING: You’re raising your kid to be a member of the human race, a society, a community, a family – not to be the center of attention.

2. REAL LIFE IS DISAPPOINTING: Learning early to handle disappointments well helps your kid become confident, self-governing and optimistic in a world full of limitations.

3. AUTONOMY IS THE GOAL: Effective self-governance and healthy self-esteem come from knowing our strengths and weaknesses in doing things in the real world and getting feedback, not from excessive encouragement or praise.

4. DON’T FEED YOUR KID JUNK PRAISE: Junk praise (for example, “Great job!” for ordinary activities), like junk food, is addictive and takes the place of developing inner wisdom that is necessary for skillful decision-making.

5. RESILIENCE COMES FROM BEING FLEXIBLE: Don’t protect your child from making mistakes, encountering failures or knowing the limitations (of self and other) that teach us how to be flexible in facing the expectable challenges of life.
X-TREME PARENTING MAKEOVER

6. HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE PATIENCE WITH TALENTS AND CREATIVITY: Diligence and patience are necessary for true creativity to develop; it takes about ten years to become truly creative in any field.

7. KINDNESS AND GENEROSITY BRING THE GREATEST HAPPINESS: Guide your child to be compassionate and helpful to others. Teach your kid to look around and see who needs help, assistance, or support in any moment (not just special occasions). There are countless opportunities to feel happy as a result of helping.

8. GOOD CHARACTER WINS: Good manners, good conscience and virtue are the requirements for good character that provides the best foundation for success.

9. BE AN EXAMPLE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS: Show respect, kindness and interest in your own parents, partner and elders. If you don’t, your child will not show a lasting interest in elders and other family members, including you.

10. TEACH YOUR KID HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER: Belonging to a family means more than being born into it. All kids should be taught to contribute to the welfare, celebration and cooperation of their families throughout the life span, becoming valuable members.
Cure for the Self-Esteem Trap in Ourselves

X-TREME PERSONALITY MAKEOVER

1. COOPERATE AND SHARE: To be the most confident and happy person you can be, develop an engaged relationship with the people around you. Focus on your ability to share, cooperate, be empathic, and help others and yourself. This is the most ecological and environmentally friendly approach you can take to life.

2. AVOID PERFECTIONISM: There's no way to know whether you are making the "right decisions" for life's big choices (partner, work, location). Don't become obsessed with perfection. Recognize instead that you must learn to guide yourself through the disappointments, failures and mistakes that will always be a part of your life, no matter how successful you are.

3. BE MODEST: Remain modest and open to feedback about your choices, ideals and actions. You need others to help you find your way. You can't find the answers that you're looking for in your own head by constantly replaying “What if…”

4. BE FLEXIBLE: Develop a resilient spirit by recognizing how and when you need to take responsibility in response to adversity, challenge and error. Being the "best" never counts as much as being flexible and able to improve with feedback. Life is demanding, disappointing, challenging, and changing. You will never find "security" or "stability" on a permanent basis because the ground is always shifting under you.
Cure for the Self-Esteem Trap in Ourselves

5. BE PATIENT WITH YOUR TALENT: Patience and diligence are necessary for true creativity. It takes about ten years to become an original contributor in any field. Cultivate your abilities sensibly, recognizing that you won’t make your mark on the world overnight.

6. BE GENEROUS AND KIND: Any time you have a spare moment, look around and see who needs assistance, support, or care. Don’t dole out help only on special occasions or you'll miss thousands of opportunities to feel happy as a result of helping.

7. BE ORDINARY: Good manners, good conscience, and virtue are required to be a regular good person who can be trusted. Sharing and collaborating are essential for developing good character. Don't look for your own private advantages in life; they won't make you happy.

8. BECOME A MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY: Recognize that your parents, partner, and elders deserve your respect, support, and interest. They are the foundation for your own life. If you help them, your foundation will be stronger. Belonging to a family means more than being born into it. It means contributing to your family’s welfare, celebration, and happiness on a daily basis.