

Boys Need Help with Self-Esteem, Too

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I've been writing an advice column for years. Lately, I've been receiving more and more letters from boys who feel bad about themselves, who are depressed that the only friends they have are online, and who feel directionless.

Some aren't doing well in school and don't have goals for the future. Others keep up with their schoolwork but wonder whether there is any point to it.

They complain that their parents are angry with them for playing video games and being constantly online. They are angry that their parents can't seem to offer any real help. Many of them talk about having low self-esteem.

The notion that boys as well as girls are suffering from low self-esteem runs counter to the conventional wisdom. It all started with a 1995 study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) that reported that educational bias results in girls having lower self-images than boys. That started a wave of books and articles about how girls lose their voice in adolescence.

Many school systems instituted corrective measures. Even the Girl Scouts got involved. In 2002, they established a program to "address the critical nationwide problem of low self-esteem among girls."

The only problem with that AAUW study is that it isn't valid!

Current research shows that the differences in scores on tests of self-esteem between the genders is actually very small. In fact, in an analysis of several hundred studies of men and women, boys and girls, ages 7 – 60, the males came up with only slightly better scores. In still another overview study of 115 studies, researchers did not find gender differences in self-esteem. Those who accepted that only girls question their self-worth apparently were overly impressed by the swagger of the boys who seemed to be making it and missed the boys who retreated to their rooms and all-night video gaming. Yes, the girls do have self-esteem issues during adolescence. But so do the boys. The letters I receive only confirm it: Adolescence is hard on kids — boys and girls alike.

Do Good to Feel Good

The most important principle for building self-esteem is this: Feeling good about the self comes from doing something to feel good about. Positive self-esteem has to be based in doing real and worthwhile things. Adult reassurance that he's special doesn't add up to much if a guy knows he hasn't done anything to earn it. Wishing that somehow he would wake up tomorrow feeling better about himself won't help either.

Our boys need to be involved in activities that are meaningful and that keep them involved with other kids who are constructively occupied. Teenage boys need their parents to keep actively parenting even though they may be bigger, speak in grunts, and would just as soon keep us on the fringes of their lives. Don't buy it. They may be as big as adults but their values are still developing and their self-esteem is still gelling. Yes, we need to start letting go but we also need to continue to provide some limits and guidance while they finish their growing. Here are five ideas to help boys come through their teen years with their self-esteem intact:

1. The boys who are the most worrisome are those who retreat to their rooms and only engage with online 'friends' they will never meet. Get them out of there and into life. Encourage activity. If your kid is an athlete, that's easy. Go to practices and games. Cheer him on for his effort. But not every boy is into sports or is good enough to make the teams. If your son isn't a future football star, help him find something else. There are music and theater groups, gyms and martial arts classes, youth groups, Scout troops, outdoors clubs and classes – to name only a few options – in almost every community. Do your homework and find out where and when such groups meet. Encourage involvement. Not only will your son have something to do with his time but he will find other guys like himself to hang with. He will also feel good about himself when he becomes more skilled at whatever it is he chooses to do.
2. Develop a culture of helpfulness in your family. When helping is normal in a family, it's normal to help. If you have an elderly neighbor, rally the family to shovel their walk or mow

their lawn as a gift. Think about walking the dogs at the local shelter, helping out at a soup kitchen once a month, or sharing music at a senior center. Get involved as a family with a charitable activity. Do a run for charity. If you're not the running type, your family can still help out at such events by helping with the check-in or passing out T-shirts and water. Lending a helping hand to neighbors or raising money for a good cause creates positive family memories and makes everyone feel great.

3. Welcome your son's friends to come along any time you are doing something fun. Open your home (and your refrigerator if you can afford it) to the gang. You'll know your son better if you know his friends. Further, it's much healthier for boys to work together to beat a video game, watch TV or shoot baskets than for them to be in isolation.
4. Encourage him to find a part-time paid job. If paid work is hard to find, help him consider an unpaid internship or volunteering at the same place for awhile. Network with your friends and coworkers to introduce your boys to work they might want to do someday. Hospitals, animal shelters, and other nonprofits are always looking for extra help. Work gives the kids meaning and experience and helps them start to build a resume for when they apply to schools or look for work after graduation.
5. Limit screen time. Yes, it's easier to let a grumpy teen go to his room to watch TV or play games than to get him to connect with the family and community. But you could lose him in there. Keep the computers out of the bedrooms and monitor when he's on and where. Yes, it's normal for this generation to be skilled at social media and virtual entertainment. But -- you know the but. Kids who aren't engaged in real life as well are often the most troubled. If he truly loves the gaming, get involved. Learn enough about what he is doing and where he is going online to be able to have intelligent conversations with him about it. If you're also doing nos. 1 through 4, there won't be enough time for your son to become a video addict. Instead, computers will be only a part of his life instead of a substitute for it.