

## Turning Around Negative Self-Image

It's a fact that most young people have a delicate psyche. Kids, from tweens through teens, are extremely conscious of their self-image and how other people view them. Comments made to them, whether harsh, sarcastic or completely unintentional, can have negative and lasting effects.

"In seventh grade, Maddie's English teacher told her she was stupid. Instead of trying to understand Maddie's dyslexia, the teacher would comment about her horrible spelling in front of the class. Even though Maddie qualified for a gifted-level English class, the teacher kept insinuating that she didn't belong. At the end of the semester, the teacher gave her a D, the lowest grade she'd ever gotten.

The blow to Maddie's self-esteem was devastating. Her grades in other classes began to slip. Her social world began to shrink. She lost her enthusiasm for school, friends, and activities."

Parents are alarmed when their teenagers withdraw into a shell. Some parents recall their sons or daughters being enthusiastic and outgoing until a particular incident triggered a shutdown. Others, with sons or daughters who have always been a little on the shy side, worry that their shyness is keeping them from growing and experiencing life.

### Image Isn't Everything

There are also those kids who are not so much withdrawn as they are caught up in maintaining an image. They spend a lot of time and energy being the tough guy, the glamour girl, or the most outrageous, and not much time being themselves. Some young people with low self-esteem are easily coerced by peer pressure into doing things against their will: drugs, bullying, and playing hooky. And there are those who pour a lot of energy into avoiding peer pressure. They conform to what they think is normal and avoid doing anything that might make them stick out.

The common thread among them is avoidance. Whether they withdraw, conform, or hide behind an image, they're trying to duck from somebody they don't want to deal with: themselves.

At the heart of this issue is negative self-image. For a kaleidoscope of reasons, teens can end up feeling bad about themselves - or about a particular aspect of themselves. They may become afraid to show their true selves - sometimes even to their parents.

Everybody goes through this kind of thing at some level. Most of the time, it's an event or a phase. Other times, it's a downward spiral. That's when it becomes potentially damaging to teens - and terrifying to parents.

### Not Perfect Equals No Good

Sometimes, when young people are exploring their identities and the way they present themselves to the world, they realize that they've gotten locked into the belief that they need to be perfect. They discover that they've been thinking in black and white. If they're not pretty enough, they're ugly. If they're too fat, too thin, or don't have the right clothes, they're worthless. They have to look good all the time or they'll be called out as losers.

When they explore what's motivating this obsession with being perfect, they often discover that it's fear. They're afraid their peers will judge them by their flaws - and often they're right.

What's perfection costing them? People who get onto the "perfect" track avoid situations that could expose them when they're looking less than perfect. They forget that when people are

doing something for the first time, they're probably not going to do it perfectly - and they're going to look a little awkward while they're learning to do it. But since many are afraid of looking uncool, they shy away from trying anything new.

The bottom line is when teens obsess about perfection, they're focusing on things that have nothing to do with who they really are. When they realize that the unique, complex, terrific person inside them isn't getting a chance to be known, appreciated, or developed, they begin to look at their fear of social situations,

### **Positivity to the Rescue**

Young people with negative self-images really blossom when they and their parents keep a relentless focus on the positive - when they acknowledge every effort and celebrate every achievement. It's not just about praising them for what they've done, but also for who they are.

Positivity snowballs over time: success builds on success. After a while, it reaches a tipping point. Negative self-image falls away and the unstoppable dynamo within the individual surges ahead. Once kids acquire a taste for success, once they see how much they're really capable of doing, there's no stopping them.

Maddie, whose teacher told her she was dumb, decided she wanted to be the kind of person who was inspired to do great things. Her little bit of shyness and reservation disappeared. It was replaced by self-confidence and self-assuredness. The girl who was once told she was too stupid to be in the gifted English class went on to ace AP English along with AP Calculus and Physics - and also won four consecutive awards for community service.

Duncan was a boy who was ostracized because he marched to a different drummer and was always inventing things and asking questions. With a great deal of positive support from his parents, he decided to embrace the things that made him different, such as his natural curiosity and inquiring mind. He convinced himself that he wouldn't let social conventions hold him back from having a great life. He embarked on pathways few have traveled, including graduating with a triple major from Tufts University.

No one can teach confidence to a young person. Confidence is theirs to discover. But parents can make sure that the evidence of their sons' and daughters' greatness is all around them - that it's recognized and acknowledged. In time, everyone will start to see and realize their own potential.