

The *New Improved* Self-Esteem

IT'S NOT ABOUT PUMPING YOURSELF UP SO YOU FEEL FABULOUS 100 PERCENT OF THE TIME. IT'S NOT ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS—OR YOUR MOTHER—TELLING YOU YOU'RE THE TOPS, THE BEST IN THE WORLD, NO WAIT, THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE. THAT KIND OF OVERINFLATED EGO IS WOEFULLY VULNERABLE TO PINPRICKS, WHICH IS WHY WE'RE LETTING THE HOT AIR OUT OF THE SELF-ESTEEM BALLOON—AND FINDING A MORE SOLID BASIS FOR CARRYING YOURSELF THROUGH THE WORLD. WE HEAR FROM A WOMAN WHO WENT ON A QUEST TO FINALLY FEEL GOOD ENOUGH, AND SEVEN WRITERS WHO SHARE THEIR “HEY! I'M OKAY!” MOMENTS. BUT FIRST, **AIMEE LEE BALL** REPORTS ON THE GROUND-BREAKING RESEARCH PROVING THAT REAL SELF-ESTEEM CAN BE LEARNED, TAUGHT, DEVELOPED, AND, BEST OF ALL, SPREAD AROUND LIKE CRAZY.

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HINSDALE, ILLINOIS, is an affluent suburb about 20 miles west of Chicago, a community of large, gracious homes on manicured lawns, with a local Ferrari/Maserati dealership and a shop window promoting a “cashmere sport coat event.” It is quietly acknowledged among the residents that prospective Masters of the Universe are being reared here, the future oligarchs of companies such as Enron or Tyco, which have not exactly earned a reputation for fostering strong character. And so several years ago, with an eye to building integrity in the next generation, the Hinsdale school district incorporated a program called Lions Quest, based on the idea that students who function well both socially and emotionally are best equipped to succeed, in school and beyond. All grades, kindergarten through eighth, have innovative lesson plans about “growing as a group,” “making positive decisions,” “setting goals for service,” and other ways to be good citizens of the world.

At 8 A.M. one morning, social worker Jane Herron gathers a dozen or so of her eighth-grade charges at Hinsdale Middle School for an “advisory” hour. She lays two long strips of masking tape on the floor and tells the kids to imagine the foot-wide swath as a log in the forest. They are to rearrange themselves according to birthdays, without stepping off the log and without talking. One tall blond boy, reminiscent of the young

Hubbell Gardner, for whom “things came too easily” in *The Way We Were*, automatically goes to the head of the line, only to discover through hand signals (two fingers held up for February, three for March) that his real place is somewhere in the middle. After a good deal of fumbling, gesturing, and creative attempts at nonverbal communication, they get the job done, then sort themselves out according to shoe size.

“What made you successful?” asks Herron, and the thoughtful responses range from “demonstrating” to “using a light touch,” with one kid joking, “Who’s our MVP?” It’s clear that these teens have been subtly indoctrinated with some ideas about negotiation, frustration, false assumptions, and teamwork.

TEN OR 20 YEARS AGO, social and emotional skills would not have been given much consideration in a school curriculum. It was the era of self-esteem, with a bandwagon of educators and mental health professionals intent on helping kids become more capable wielders of the world by making them feel good about themselves, even absent any measurable accomplishment. But in recent years, researchers have found that self-esteem falls far short of its anticipated benefits. What’s more important is a sense of self-mastery—getting along in the world and knowing you can handle yourself in myriad situations. The concept is liberating

for adults too: Rather than facing the daunting task of going back into your childhood to figure out why you are insecure, you can learn specific skills right now to become competent. No one's suggesting that you deny your feelings of inadequacy; you simply prove them wrong.

The national insistence on self-esteem as an inalienable right may have been kicked off in 1969 with the publication of *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, by Los Angeles psychologist Nathaniel Branden, who created a cottage industry with 14 books on the subject. And thousands of scholarly articles were written between 1970 and 2000, many of which suggested that self-esteem was an essential component of success in everything from school and career to marriage and sex. In 1987 California instituted a state Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility.

By the mid-1990s, to ensure that all children felt good about themselves, teachers were careful to pronounce each finger painting a Picasso, and some schools dropped honor rolls, which were thought to be too hurtful to students who did not make the list. The extreme of the self-esteem craze was personified on *Saturday Night Live* by comedian Al Franken, whose character Stuart Smalley intoned vapid affirmations such as "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me." (In one famous SNL skit, he tried to help Michael Jordan resolve nonexistent doubts about his basketball-playing ability.)

Then in 2003, a leading advocate of self-esteem theory began a review of the copious research, analyzing some 15,000 studies. A team led by Roy Baumeister, PhD, professor of psychology at Florida State University, in Tallahassee, determined that only 200 of the studies met rigorous scientific standards, and to their great surprise, those 200 failed to show that having high self-esteem does much of anything for you: It doesn't improve grades or career achievement, reduce alcohol usage, lower the incidence of violent behavior, or translate into higher estimates by others of a person's intelligence, beauty, or virtue. On the contrary, trying to pump up someone's self-worth with a pep talk can backfire. In one example recently reported in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, college students who did poorly on their midterms were given weekly study aids, but some were told to keep their

heads up and feel good about themselves, while others were urged to take responsibility for their schoolwork. Those who received the first—self-esteem—message did dramatically worse on the final.

"There's no question you get the best results with highly contingent praise and criticism," says Baumeister. "That means praising exactly what you did right and criticizing exactly what you did wrong. Just praising kids regardless of how they do contains very little useful information; if anything, it has a negative effect on learning. I've had to revise my opinions about self-esteem several times; I'm kind of done with it. I don't think it can deliver much of what we want. Self-control, self-regulation—these give a whole lot more bang for the buck, deliver a lot more in practical results. I think self-esteem is relegated, if not to Siberia, at least to the Urals."

Perhaps the final banishment of the idea comes from Carol Dweck, PhD, a well-respected professor of psychology at Stanford University, whose latest book is *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. "People think that self-esteem is the most important thing in the world, that you can give it to children, almost on a silver platter, by shielding them from criticism and praising their skills and talents," says Dweck, who has been studying how kids succeed and fail for nearly 40 years. "It's a very common and harmful belief. In the old days, the parents would be driving kids home from Little League saying, 'When you struck out, you didn't keep your eye on the ball.' Now they say, 'The ref robbed you.' The parents think they're helping them, protecting them from injury. In fact, they're making them so vulnerable that they're not resilient."

Dweck's studies clearly show that when children are told they're brilliant, they often start thinking of effort as a sign of stupidity. Then as soon as they hit challenging schoolwork, they panic, and many of them quit because working hard is too threatening. "What's really effective is praising the process that the child is engaging in," Dweck explains. "Effort, strategy, perseverance, improvement—these things tell them what to do next time." In one recent experiment, junior high students took a workshop in study skills, but only one group got two 25-minute lessons about how intelligence can be developed, learning that the brain grows new neurons when challenged. In a single semester, that group improved their grades, motivation,

and study habits compared with the other. “You get an owner’s manual when you buy an iPod or a VCR,” says Dweck, “but nobody gives you one for your brain, and it’s the most important appliance you’ll have.”

The shift in thinking by researchers like Dweck and Baumeister dovetails with a revolutionary educational philosophy called social and emotional learning, or SEL, which takes the eminently sensible position that if students are going to be intellectual risk takers, they need to feel safe, and teaches a wide range of skills to help them navigate the world. Psychologist and science writer Daniel Goleman’s best-selling 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* made popular the idea that children, not to mention adults, can and should be instructed about empathy, self-awareness, self-discipline, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively. At the time, IQ was the unquestioned gauge for getting ahead in life, but Goleman argued that these other abilities are of equal consequence, key to both enhancing learning and preventing pervasive problems such as violence. Self-esteem is a part of SEL, but only a narrow slice, according to Goleman. “Self-esteem or self-efficacy has to do with a realistic assessment of your strengths and weaknesses,” he says, “but SEL includes other things: how you manage stress and mobilize paralyzing emotions. Self-esteem is much better reframed as self-mastery.”

Goleman tells a story about three 12-year-olds heading for gym class on the soccer field. Two of the boys, obviously athletic, are snickering behind the third, a chubby classmate. “So, you’re going to try to play soccer,” says one of the athletes, his voice dripping with contempt. It’s a moment that can easily escalate into a fight. Instead, the chubby boy closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and answers, “I’m going to try. But I’m not very good at it. I’m great at art—show me anything, and I can draw it. Now you,” he adds, pointing to his antagonist, “you’re fantastic at soccer. I’d like to be that good. Maybe if I practiced...” The athlete, now flattered and disarmed, even offers some help. In defusing the situation, the aspiring artist has performed what Goleman calls neural jujitsu, transforming the boys’ shared emotional chemistry from hostile to friendly.

To promote the development of scenarios like this, Goleman founded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) with philan-

MASTER YOUR UNIVERSE

YOU NEVER HAVE TO TELL YOURSELF HOW MAAHVELOUS YOU ARE AGAIN. These three exercises from Six Seconds, a California-based international nonprofit organization that offers training in emotional and social intelligence, are designed to develop a core of competence—and an earned sense of confidence.

FEELINGS QUILT: One of the keys to making good decisions is developing emotional literacy—that is, tuning in to your own reactions and noticing that you may have many feelings at once. Take a small piece of paper, fold it twice (you’ll make four squares), and unfold it. Think of a big moment that happened yesterday. In one of the squares, enter a symbol or design showing how you felt. What else did you feel? Write it in another square. Repeat for the last two squares. Now that you can see the range of emotions you had, which one got the most attention? Was it the most useful one to focus on? Did you ignore some of them?

INTEGRITY PENNIES: Learning to manage your reactions more carefully is crucial to self-mastery. First thing in the morning, put ten pennies in your left pocket. Each time you say or do something other than what you genuinely intended (maybe you softened a response too much or were harsher than you meant to be), transfer one penny to your right pocket. Keep practicing to reduce the number of right-pocket pennies.

THE SILENT-MOVIE GAME: This exercise helps you use the power of your feelings for the greater good. With a friend at lunch, on the bus, or in an airport, pick a few people and guess what’s going on inside their minds. Then compare notes on what you glean the subjects are thinking, feeling, and doing, and what each most needs now from a supportive ally or friend.

thropist Eileen Rockefeller Growald in 1994. Hinsdale’s Lions Quest is one of the growing number of CASEL-endorsed programs in schools from the United States to Singapore—and it seems they’re working. An analysis of more than 200 SEL programs just

being released demonstrates a big payoff in both personal conduct and academic success. “Every measure of positive behavior goes up—liking school, feeling someone in school cares about them,” says Goleman. “And all antisocial behaviors go down— violence, substance abuse.” The research indicates that an effective SEL program significantly improves test scores, grade point averages, and attendance, while greatly reducing misbehavior and suspension.

In 2004 Illinois became the first state to include social and emotional learning in the standards from preschool through high school. “Any parent who wants SEL can say it’s in the policy,” says Mary Utne O’Brien, vice president of strategic initiatives for CASEL, which is based at the University of Illinois at Chicago. This is a great opportunity, according to Linda Lantieri, a founding board member of CASEL. “We’re talking about a whole new vision in which educating the heart is as important as educating the mind,” she says. “We’re really not teaching values, we’re actually teaching skills, almost like tools in a toolbox.”

Lantieri cofounded a program called Resolving Conflict Creatively that is now embedded in the curriculum of P.S. 24 in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Sunset Park. It is 800 miles (light-years in some respects) away from Hinsdale, a dual-language facility flanked by auto body shops, where 90 percent of the students are from working-class Latino families, but there’s an equal commitment to social and emotional learning. At a regular “lunch club,” kids who have been targeted as troublemakers are taught how to be respectful, stop name-calling, and defuse tension. “This is a crowded place,” says guidance counselor Gloria Jaramillo. “There are bumps by mistake, spills by mistake. If a child could not immediately assume there’s a hostile intent behind the contact, it would eliminate three-quarters of the problems.”

Another feature of the program is “peace corners,” where the younger students can go to calm down, write out what they’re feeling, or talk with a classmate who’s been trained as a “peace helper.” One day a peace helper named Maria resolved a flare-up that erupted when one girl took another’s pocketbook, thinking it was hers. It turned out to be an honest mistake; they had the same purse, but by the time they realized that, tempers had escalated. Maria asked them to describe the problem, got each to paraphrase what the other

said, and as they cooled down, the three came up with solutions.

If children clearly benefit from reframing self-esteem, the implications for adults are seismic—especially for anyone who grew up valiantly and futilely trying to inflate her sense of worth with airy affirmations (“Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better!”) or wallpapering the mirror with Post-it notes reminding, “I am powerful,” “I am beautiful,” “I’m okay, you’re okay”—only to find the words falling away like used-up stick-em.

The value of self-mastery skills is already taking hold in the workplace, with organizations ranging from American Express to the United States Marine Corps integrating SEL into their leadership training. At FedEx many senior managers now complete a course named Legacy, developed with a California-based international nonprofit named Six Seconds. One of the exercises is called Sneetch Marbles, inspired by a Dr. Seuss book. The group is divided arbitrarily into Star-Bellied Sneetches and Plain-Bellied Sneetches, working together with an equally arbitrary set of rules as an assembly line rolling marbles through pipes. But the Star Bellies have all the information and power; the Plain Bellies can’t speak unless they’re called on, and they don’t get any treats. Some of them mutiny, some want to please the boss-like Star Bellies, some undermine the process, some start cheating, some check out. Then everyone is asked questions: What helped them be engaged or disengaged? Were they optimistic or pessimistic? Did they notice anybody else’s feelings? Did they find any purpose in the exercise? “It creates an opportunity for all kinds of interesting discussions,” says Joshua Freedman, chief operating officer of Six Seconds. “This work tells you your patterns: *When I think the rules are unfair, I cheat. Or When I think it’s not going well, I blame others. Or When I think the senior manager is a jerk, I rebel.* Even at very high levels of corporations, we’re all still in the schoolyard. We feel vulnerable and we’re protecting ourselves. But once people become aware of a pattern, they’re asked if it’s getting them what they really want.” Then they can change it.

This kind of thinking—and rethinking—may have even broader applications, and it’s been given a global dimension by Carol Gilligan, PhD. It was her groundbreaking 1982 book *In a Different Voice* that shed light

on why girls so often lose their footing in adolescence; it was, in essence, a precursor to SEL. “Women were seen as deficient,” says Gilligan, now professor of humanities and applied psychology at New York University. “The kind of intelligence that was valued was abstract and principled, and the sense of self that was seen as developing toward maturity was autonomous and self-sufficient. Women saw things more in context, and their thinking was connected to emotions. A voice you could characterize as very socially or emotionally intelligent was being suppressed.”

In an upcoming book she’s coauthoring, tentatively titled *Darkness Visible: The Psychology of Loss, Patriarchy, and Democracy’s Future*, Gilligan is examining how the suppression of social and emotional intelligence underlies patterns of ethical injustice. “Our vision of a democratic society is constantly compromised by racism, sexism, homophobia,” she says. Anyone conversant with SEL principles would find such bias abhorrent. Without that voice, she argues, “you sow the grounds for various kinds of social injustice. You lose the ability to work out conflict without resorting to violence.”

Freedman of Six Seconds swears that teaching social and emotional skills is exactly the same for a corporate executive and a 6-year-old. Back in the Hinsdale school district, first graders absorb a sort of mini SEL manifesto that’s permanently posted on their blackboard. Called “Our Promise to Each Other,” it reads:

“When we care about each other and our classroom, we are kind and respectful, we listen carefully, help each other learn, always try our best, raise our hand, and have fun together. We keep our hands and feet to ourselves. We stand up for ourselves and others. When someone asks us to stop, we stop. We do all of this, even when no one is watching!”

These kinds of self-mastery lessons are bound to become more widely available to people of all ages through schools, businesses, therapists, and personal growth seminars—with tremendous promise. The idea that you can learn skills like staying levelheaded and articulate during a heated argument, or turning a negative work situation to your advantage with grace and integrity, means that women no longer have to

bank on empty phrases to pump up self-esteem; they can say, “Yes, I mastered that,” “I handled it well.” Imagine the possibilities if abusive men were fluent in the basic SEL tenets of empathy, self-discipline, and handling challenging situations constructively. Consider how any marriage could be improved if the partners were more adept at negotiation, teamwork, and making responsible decisions. And for any woman who has spent years in therapy rooting around the past in search of why her confidence is so shaky, the new self-mastery model offers concrete tools to actually strengthen those foundations. As a result, when she needs someone to lean on, she can always find that person: herself.

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