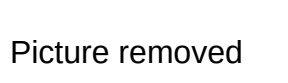
Enhancing the Self-Esteem of Your Students

By Joan Mencke Stoner

Afraid of failing, afraid of being kept back, afraid of feeling themselves stupid . . . . Even in the kindest and gentlest of schools, children are afraid, many of them a great deal of the time, some of them almost all of the time.



"Where were you? I just answered that question!" "You didn't listen again, did you?" "I told you you'd get no points on that paper if it wasn't in on time!" "This is REALLY easy! Anybody can do it!" "You'll never make it in college unless you learn to write in cursive!" "You really don't have the ability to make it in college!" "You're just totally off base with your answers! That's not right by any stretch of the imagination!" "Sit down and keep your mouth shut!" "You're certainly not the student your sisters were!"

Comments like these from teachers have discouraged and devastated many students, but especially those with identified and unidentified learning disabilities.

In fifth grade, my son started complaining that he didn't feel well and couldn't go to school. When your parents are teachers, it isn't easy to convince them that you really need to stay home from school! After a week of frustration, we finally identified the real issue. The teacher believed that all students should write in cursive. Although Tripp knew the shapes of the cursive letters, he did not have the fine motor control to write that way comfortably, accurately, or fluidly.

Tripp's stomach had begun to give him a lot of trouble, and the doctor prescribed adult ulcer medicine until the problem subsided. It finally became necessary to talk with his teacher about the stress he was suffering from being expected to do something he simply could not do. Fortunately, the teacher had an understanding heart, and agreed to let Tripp work for legibility with manuscript lettering and not worry about cursive.

Three years later, in eighth grade, he came home with an English assignment to copy a paragraph in cursive. It had to be written in permanent ink and could have no more than five corrections with White-Out. When Tripp started over for the fourth time, I whisked him off to the computer, and we entered it together. He worried all that evening that his teacher wouldn't like it, but we turned it in anyway, accompanied by a note of explanation.

The first week of his junior year in high school, Tripp asked me to talk to his English

teacher. She had told the students that they wouldn't be able to make it in college unless they could write in cursive. In order to help them, she would require that they write everything in cursive. If she caught them printing, she would deduct points from their grade and call out their names.

I had taught at that school and knew how unrelenting that particular teacher was. I dreaded the prospect of going to school the next morning to talk to her.

About 4 a.m., an idea came to me. I decided to approach her by saying, "I need to share some information with you." I told her about the previous difficulties and asked that Tripp not be required to conform to the cursive writing rule. She agreed that it would probably be best if he was excused. I was relieved that the meeting had gone so well, but I wasn't so pleased when my son came home from school that day. The teacher had announced to the class that everyone would be expected to write in cursive *except* him!

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Teachers often say things to children that destroy trust, cooperation, and self-esteem. Verbal exchanges in classrooms can upset and stress both teachers and students. In *No Easy Answers*,[2] Sally Smith encourages teachers who feel upset to think back to the particular student with whom they were working when they became angry. Only then will they realize which child's frustration they have picked up. Then the task that the child was attempting to do when he or she became frustrated should be analyzed.

Students with learning disabilities are even more sensitive than other children to their difficulties in the classroom. Teachers who are impatient or insensitive can unwittingly compound academic problems and hasten the development of secondary emotional and/or behavior problems.

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Some sensitive students become the class clown and express their frustrations by "acting out." Others internalize their stress and develop physical complaints. Once these difficulties develop, it is hard to tell which came first, the behavior problems or the physical and emotional difficulties. Often, the behavior masks the academic problems.

Stress warning signs may include:

- a sudden increase/decrease in school effort,
- major change in attitude,
- withdrawal or outbursts,
- fatigue or vague illness,
- sleeping problems,
- headaches and stomach aches,
- drug use or abuse,
- increase in allergic or asthmatic attacks,
- the avoidance of school,
- loss of appetite or excessive eating,
- antisocial or disruptive behaviors.

To avoid these problems, teachers should take special effort to censor their comments to children, particularly when the teachers feel stressed. For example, if a child asks a question about materials that the teacher feels he or she has just explained well, it is important to give a patient response. Instead of saying, "Where were you? I just answered that question!" it is better to say, "That is a hard question. Let's go over it again."

Several factors may be at work here. Even the most dedicated student occassionally loses his or her concentration. It takes tremendous effort to ignore what is going on all around you and attend to the unfamiliar concepts that the teacher is explaining at the front of the classroom. (And there is always the possibility that the answer really was not clearly explained.)

Some teachers say to students who turn in poor work, "What kind of work is this?" or "Is this the best you can do?" or "If you'd just listen, you'd know the answer!" Such responses do not encourage better work the next time or "shape up" a student who gave less than his or her best. In fact, this type of put-down destroys any hope of cooperation.

If the teacher responds differently, the result can be different, too. Sitting down with a student and finding at least one or two positive things to say about the assignment, paper, or project, and assisting the child in working on just one weakness will encourage him or her to improve.

If a student is talking when he ought to listen, the teacher should walk casually over to the talker and gently place a hand on his or her shoulder. Sometimes, students are actually asking a neighbor a question they're afraid to ask in front of the whole class.

It is also important to remember that not all papers must have permanent letter grades (summative evaluations). Formative evaluations allow students at all levels of competency to improve.

I'll never forget a paper on curriculum theory that one of my college professors assigned. The assignment had seemed pretty nebulous from the beginning, but none of us was prepared for the comments written on our papers. Mine said simply: "Close." We were all pretty distraught, but the braver ones stayed after class to ask if we should start over. The professor smiled and took a few minutes to identify sections we needed to develop further. The next time the papers came back, mine said, "Closer!" Again we received advice on areas that needed more work. The third time the papers came back, they read, "Well done!" We learned far more from that experience than if a letter or percentage grade had been assigned the first time.

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Students with learning disabilities are even more sensitive than other children to their difficulties in the classroom.

Teachers would do well to use some of the comments found in the Grammatik IV computer program. When errors occur, responses such as the following appear on the screen:

"You may have forgotten that when you use quotation marks you should . . ." or "This sentence is too long and complicated for most readers to understand. You should consider revising."

All students have problems with their studies from time to time, but students with learning disabilities are at greater risk for "achievement stress" because of:

- insensitivity of significant others who treat them as if they will not do the work when they cannot,
- poor self-concept resulting from the gaps between abilities and disabilities,
- dependence on others for academic survival,
- rejection by teachers and peers, which results in isolation,
- reluctance to ask questions for fear of being laughed at.[3]

Confused and frustrated by their inability to accomplish what others seem to do easily, children with learning disabilities are frustrated and angry much of the time.[4]

Learning does not have to be a frustrating and painful experience! The ideas described above offer teachers with a variety of positive approaches that will enhance the self-esteem of all their students.

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REFERENCES

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3. *Stress Management for Persons With Learning Disabilities.* ERIC Digest #452. The Council for Exceptional Children.

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