



Five Ways to Help Teens Build a Sense of Self-Worth

Teens are experiencing increased levels of anxiety and perfectionism. Encouraging them to develop their strengths and see beyond themselves can help boost their self-esteem.

BY [AMY L. EVA](#) MAY 23, 2018

No one wants to hang out with me. I'm a failure at school. All my other friends seem happy. What's wrong with me?

These kinds of negative thoughts are becoming more common in our homes and schools. Teens are experiencing increased anxiety, and studies indicate that college students in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States are becoming more perfectionistic over time, measuring themselves against unrealistic standards. Why is this happening? We can't say for sure—but we do know there are steps teens can take to improve their mental health.

A 2018 study of early adolescents suggests that self-concept (your perception of self) plays a central role in emotional well-being. According to the study, a supportive classroom environment and positive social relationships also affect teen well-being—but the impact is indirect. Positive self-concept seems to be the key variable in the well-being equation. If a student feels good about herself, then she may be more likely to connect with others and benefit from the supports provided at school.

So, how can we influence how students think about themselves? This may feel like a very tall order; yet there is a lot of research out there that provides some clues for supporting the teens in your life. Here are five ways to help tweens and teens move toward a more positive self-concept.

1. Get physical

Although you may have heard this before, kids really can benefit from regular exercise (especially when their tendency is to sit in front of a screen). A recent review of 38 international studies indicates that physical activity *alone* can improve self-esteem and self-concept in children and adolescents.

Apparently, the exercise setting also matters. Students who participated in supervised activities in schools or gymnasiums reported more significant growth in self-esteem than those who exercised at home and in other settings.

Adolescents' self-concept is most strongly linked to their sense of physical attractiveness and body image, an area where many people struggle. So, encourage more regular exercise programs during and after school, and support team sports, strength training, running, yoga, and swimming—not just for their effects on the body but on the mind, as well. Getting out and engaging in some form of exercise can make us feel stronger, healthier, and more empowered.

2. Focus on self-compassion (not self-esteem)

Because self-esteem is a global *evaluation* of your overall worth, it has its dangers. *What am I achieving? Am I good enough? How do I compare with my peers?*

What would happen if we could stop judging ourselves? Researcher Kristen Neff claims that self-

compassion—treating yourself with kindness, openness, and acceptance—is a healthy alternative to the incessant striving and performance orientation often tied up with self-esteem. In her study of adolescents and young adults, she found that participants with higher self-compassion demonstrated greater well-being. Why? They were okay with their flaws, acknowledged that they struggled just like those around them (“Everybody makes mistakes; you are not alone”), and treated themselves with the same kindness they would extend to a friend (“It’s okay; you did your best”).

If you are interested in specific techniques and strategies for enhancing self-compassion in teens, take a look at the work of psychologist Karen Bluth. She recently developed a program called Making Friends with Yourself. Youth participating in this eight-week program reported greater resilience, less depression, and less stress at the end of it. However, if there isn’t a program near you, consider sharing this self-compassion workbook with the teens in your life.

3. Avoid social comparison

When we focus on self-esteem, we tend to get caught up in comparing ourselves to others. Teens, in particular, often sense an “imaginary audience” (i.e., “Everyone is looking at me!”) and can become highly sensitized to who they are relative to everyone around them. Instagram and other social media platforms don’t necessarily help. Some research suggests an association between social media and depression, anxiety, loneliness, and FoMO (fear of missing out) among teens. Their posts may not rack up the number of “likes” that their friends’ posts do, or they may feel excluded when they see pictures of classmates happily spending time together without them.

A new app for teen girls called Maverick may be a healthier option than Snapchat or Instagram. On this social media platform, teens can connect with role models (called “Catalysts”) and explore their creativity (such as designing their own superhero or choosing a personal mantra). Of course, there is always the option of taking a break from social media, as well.

Regardless of what teens choose to do online, many of our schools are also structured for social comparison. Grading, labeling, and tracking practices (grouping students based on their academic performance) don’t necessarily honor the stops, starts, and inevitable mistakes that are a natural part of the learning process. Here are some school-based alternatives designed to reduce social comparison:

- Don’t make grades public.
- Provide opportunities to revise and redo assignments.
- Avoid ability grouping as much as possible.
- Focus on individual growth and improvement.
- Acknowledge students’ small successes.
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4. Capitalize on specific skills

If you keep your eye out for teens’ talents and interests, you can support them in cultivating their strengths. Your son may think he is a terrible athlete, but he lights up when he works on school science projects. Then there’s that quiet, disheveled ninth-grade girl who sits in the back of your class. She may feel socially awkward, but she wows you with her poetry.

Researcher Susan Harter has studied adolescent self-esteem and self-concept for years. She claims that self-concept is domain-specific. Our overall self-esteem or sense of worth tends to be rooted in eight distinct areas: athletic competence, scholastic competence, behavioral conduct, social acceptance, close friendship, romantic appeal, job satisfaction, and physical attractiveness.

Talk to the teens in your life. What are their personal values and priorities? Share surveys with them like the VIA (which identifies character strengths like bravery, honesty, and leadership) or have them take a multiple intelligences quiz. Celebrate their talents and tailor activities and instruction around their abilities as

much as possible.

It may not be easy to shift teens' global sense of self-worth, but we can certainly highlight and encourage areas of interest and particular skill sets so that they feel more confident, capable, and inspired.

5. Help others (especially strangers)

Finally, when teens reach out to others, they are more likely to feel better about themselves. A [2017 study](#) of 681 U.S. adolescents (ages 11-14) examined their kind and helpful behavior over a four-year period. Researchers found that adolescents who were kind and helpful in general had higher self-esteem, but those who directed their generosity toward strangers (not friends and family) tended to grow in self-esteem. Last Friday, I joined my daughter and her peers during the “action” phase of their “[Change the World](#)” project. Their social studies teacher, [Tim Owens](#), tasked the eighth graders with choosing a sustainability issue, researching the problem and possible solutions, planning action, and implementing the action. These middle schoolers spent a full day canvassing their neighborhoods to advocate for policies that protected people they don't know, like local refugees and homeless youth—as well as animals used for product testing. I've never seen my daughter and her friends more energized, confident, and engaged with their community.

As adults, we can actively support [service learning](#) projects in our schools and our teens' interests in advocacy and [civil engagement](#). Adolescents around the world can also work remotely with non-profit organizations like [DoSomething](#), “a digital platform promoting offline action” in 131 countries. On this site, young people can choose a cause, the amount of time they want to commit to it, and the type of help they would like to provide (e.g., face-to-face, improving a space, making something, sharing something, etc.) When teens regularly contribute to a larger cause, they learn to [think beyond themselves](#), which may ultimately help them to be more positive, empowered, and purposeful.

As many teens struggle with anxiety and perfectionism, our urge may be to jump in and fix their problems, whatever we perceive them to be. But a better approach, one that will hopefully help reverse these worrying trends, is to cheer them on as they develop the mental habits and strengths that will support them throughout their lives.

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