

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Self-Esteem for Girls

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Acknowledgments

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Self-Esteem
for Girls
100 Tips

**for Raising Happy and
Confident Children**

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer



VERMILION
LONDON

DEDICATION

For Georgia and her life-long friends Miranda, Avani, Lizzie
and Jessica,
with whom she has shared so much for so long



CHAPTER 1

Understanding Her Challenges and Opportunities

Everything seems to be going right for girls. Their confidence, exam results, and career opportunities are rising. Released from the prison of home and hearth, they have a freedom that was unheard of 50 years ago. Many boys feel that girls have it easy and resent it, for the have-it-all world that beckoned their mothers seems a go-and-get-it-all world to their daughters, and leaves boys behind.

Competent, successful superwomen have bred competent, successful supergirls - or have they? Not very far under the surface of 'girl power' lie new pressures and insecurities that come with our daughters' enhanced potential for 'success'. Some, such as eating disorders, have arrived in the slipstream of that success; others exist where success is absent, for success has certainly not come to all girls, who today manage a triple dose of expectation: to be academically and economically successful; to be emotionally independent; and to achieve the heightened standard of beauty that cosmetics, clothes and even surgery can now provide. They are expected to look good for themselves and their female friends, not necessarily for the opposite sex, who are regarded as bringing more problems than they are worth, hence the new female goal of emotional as well as economic independence. Alongside this emotional aloofness is an equally pervasive pressure

for girls to be not only sexually aware but also sexually skilful. The magazines tell them how. It is an emotional minefield in which many vulnerable girls get blown up, as teenage pregnancy figures testify.

There are academic casualties, too. While many girls are working the new educational system to their advantage, some succeed only at considerable cost to their mental health and well-being. Others fail to make it at all. Two to three girls in every 100 will attempt suicide some time in their teenage years. Indeed, females between 15 and 19 are the highest single risk group for attempted suicide.

Some parents add to the pressures their daughters feel. Like them, they fall prey to the look-good, feel-good, get-rich-quick society. Mothers can look more stunning than their ugly duckling daughters for years, and must be very self-assured not to play this game.

The brighter side of the story is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, females have more opportunities, and are less restricted by their gender than ever before. There are few areas of sport, leisure or work that remain the exclusive preserve of males, in theory at least. They can have all this and also become mothers.

With so much available to girls, parents and teachers have the task of helping them make the most of their abilities. However, to maximise their chances and to protect themselves against the potential problems of their new position in society, girls need plenty of positive self-esteem and large doses of genuine self-assurance.

Girls must fashion a new femininity - one that will encourage integrity, respect for others and themselves, independence and autonomy while acknowledging their biological inclination to nurture. Femininity used to imply making oneself look pretty for men, being self-effacing, submissive, compliant and placid, always thinking of and caring for someone else's needs before addressing one's

own. This is now rejected by most young women but, in pushing themselves forward, some have simply ape'd men.

A respectful regard for themselves as being female is vital if they are to remain psychologically intact in the face of the abuse that so many suffer, and also for their female gender. They should not consider themselves weak or inferior to boys because they may be more emotional or don't always feel in control. Girls must acknowledge their own needs while recognising other people's, see themselves as having worthwhile views, and accept that they deserve care and respect from others.

The amount of self-criticism, low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with their looks and performance that exist unexpressed behind even confident exteriors should be a matter of considerable concern. Girls thrive when people notice when they've done something well, listen to and take them seriously, and acknowledge their rights.

If girls are to become more self-assured, parents and other involved adults cannot start too soon. Building self-knowledge, identity, confidence and self-esteem - the constituents of inner strength - is the way to create a resilient young woman who is able to cope with challenges and an uncertain future with confidence.



CHAPTER 2

Meeting Her Needs

Girls' fundamental needs are the same as boys'. No one has an awareness of their gender until the age of about two, and most of us go on needing the same sort of essential support and care from those close to us throughout our adult lives. In addition to being fed and clothed appropriately and kept clean and healthy, very young girls, like boys, also need emotional sustenance. They need to be loved and cherished, appreciated and valued, noticed, enjoyed and admired. Girls thrive when these needs are met because they feel important and significant. When they feel secure, competent and capable, when they are listened to, especially as a source of authority in relation to themselves, and when they are able to develop their talents, they grow up feeling strong inside and able to walk tall. By contrast, if a girl's basic needs are not met, she will feel neglected, separate, unworthy of attention and full of shame.

Growing girls have special needs on top of these basic ones that relate to their future role in society. Parents and teachers should attend to these as well. Girls now require the confidence and flexibility to balance the demands of work and family and, at the same time, to manage the uncertainty implicit in likely domestic and job changes. They should grow up able to love and trust without making themselves vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Girls

should be helped to become strong enough inside to defend themselves against any assault or intrusion on their physical and mental integrity, at home or at work.

During childhood, girls typically develop closer relationships with their mothers. When mothers are reluctant to let go, the possessiveness and competition that arise may make separation that much harder and more painful. It is not uncommon for intimacy to be associated with exploitation and emotional aggression. Intimacy should not be allowed to develop into dependency or domination.

Meeting our daughters' need for intimacy, succour, honour and autonomy will take time and considerable effort. But if we don't put in that effort, we are likely to have to work much harder later on picking up the pieces of their consequent emotional distress.

1 Help her to believe in herself

As I left the house for my first date, my father told me that I looked wonderful and the boy was very lucky to be going out with someone so special. If he didn't appreciate that, he was the loser. He made me feel the tops and gave me the strength to cope with anything. - Jo Brand

If a girl has good self-esteem, she will automatically believe in herself as a capable and lovable person. She will have a clear and positive sense of who she is and will see herself in a favourable light. Girls with self-belief will be optimistic about what they can manage and achieve; they will be able to raise their sights, stand up for themselves and explore their potential. People who lack self-belief are filled with a generalised self-doubt which predisposes them to feel guilty, shameful and inadequate.

No girl will believe in herself if someone has not first demonstrated belief in her competence and capability and considered her worthy of love, support and attention.

Parents

- show faith and trust in your daughter - in her ability to decide certain things, to succeed at tasks, to manage her own personal care and be responsible when she's old enough
- show her that you love and enjoy her in ways that will convince her
- beware of thinking: 'I didn't get or need support, so she'll be the same' ; she is different; also, people who don't get often turn this into 'don't need' to cover up their own disappointment

- love can be shown physically in ways other than kisses and hugs – by, for example, sitting close to look at books, magazines or television, or on her bed at bedtime

Teachers

- teachers will not feel parental love for the girls in their class; however, they can make it clear that they enjoy, approve of and accept their students for who they are
- identify two or three girls in your class who show signs of low self-esteem; try to talk regularly to each one and comment favourably on her various attributes and abilities
- giving special tasks to these girls can make them feel significant, noticed, reliable and trustworthy

2 Show that you understand her

My six-year-old came home from school one day particularly fractious and tired. It turned out she'd had a difficult day squabbling with her two best friends. She felt really low, but when I told her about 'Two's company, three's a crowd' and explained the difficulties and dynamics of threesomes, even for adults, she visibly brightened.

All children find being misunderstood hugely frustrating. At first, they'll just be irritated, but when the mistake persists, they will begin to doubt themselves and their sense of reality. If your daughter's wishes, thoughts or experiences are continuously ignored or misinterpreted, it won't be surprising if she becomes resentful and angry.

You can show that you understand her by anticipating her needs and expressing her likely thoughts – though carefully – using phrases such as: 'I guess you're feeling a bit left out, am I right?' Posing the question at the end gives her room to disagree and stops you coming across as infuriatingly all-knowing – and possibly wrong.

Parents

- accept the way your daughter sees the world – she does not have to agree with you, nor you with her
- value her uniqueness; tell her what it is about her you admire and treasure
- look beyond her behaviour at possible causes and feelings
- repeat what she says to you, so that you can make sure you've understood correctly: 'So you want me to stay in

tonight because you're fed up with me working late so much this week, right?'

- remember her likes and dislikes
- state what she's likely to feel: 'You won't want to hear this, but I can't afford a new jacket for you this month'

Teachers

- make a conscious effort to see patterns in a girl's work that might show you what makes her 'tick'
- encourage class work that draws on students' likes and dislikes, and try to remember a few of them
- for girls who seem particularly trying, list four reasons why this might be so, excluding 'difficult personality'
- use 'reflective listening' phrases: 'What I hear you saying is that you did not feel you knew enough to start this homework. Let's start from what you're sure you do know'

3 Approve of who she is, even if you dislike what she does

Every girl needs to be accepted and approved of for who she is, not just because she has been 'good', 'helpful' or 'successful' and lived up to your ideal of who she should be. If she constantly fills a mould set by you, she'll quickly lose her identity and find it hard to feel happy about who she is.

Young children are always getting into scrapes because they are learning about rules, how things work and how to manage themselves. Clumsy reprimands convey disapproval and can do great damage. If you want to comment on something your daughter has done, be clear that it's her actions you disapprove of, not her. This will leave her self-worth intact while she learns to manage her behaviour and appreciate what flows from it.

Don't lose faith in her just because you are unhappy about a particular act or attitude, or leave her feeling devastated by your criticism.

Parents

- think about your daughter's good points before you criticise a particular behaviour, to help you think positively and make your comment specific
- avoid using the words 'good' or 'bad' about her behaviour, because she'll take them as reflections of herself; instead, talk about what it is she does that you like or dislike
- limit your disapproval to the moment by saying, 'Right now, I find you...'

- striking her with your hand or an object will encourage her to feel that you dislike her and she may then decide she is not good enough to be liked

Teachers

- identify something you like about each student, then it is easier to state honestly that it's her behaviour that's the problem, not the girl herself
- describe in detail the behaviour that is outside the rules; and avoid 'You' statements; saying: 'I'm finding the way you are tapping your ruler irritating' is less personally offensive and provocative than 'You are being really irritating!'

4 Give plenty of praise

Children love to be noticed and give pleasure. It is lovely to see our daughters beam with pride when they have done something well and they know we have noticed. This is the essence of constructive praise.

Girls enjoy praise because they like to know that someone appreciates the effort they have made when they have tried. But praise also helps to develop self-discipline. Through praise and encouragement, girls receive clear, positive messages about how they should lead their lives – what it is they should do, instead of hearing what it is they should not be doing.

Many people find it hard to be generous with praise. Being critical makes them feel in charge and all-knowing. Praise, on the other hand, can make them believe they've lost that powerful edge. Some don't know what to praise or what words to use. Others believe that praise will make a girl big-headed, or lazy and over-satisfied with work that isn't perfect. But being noticed and appreciated usually makes girls try harder, and it shows them how to give positive feedback to others.

Parents

- say things like :‘That’s great!’, ‘Brilliant!’, ‘Well done!’ and ‘Thanks, that was really helpful’
- find something to notice and praise at least once every day
- girls can be praised for their thinking skills (their choices, ideas, solving problems), social skills (helpfulness, understanding, sharing and flexibility),

- physical skills (running, tree-climbing, making things, sport) as well as for pleasing reports and marks
- be specific: praise what she has done, don't effuse in general about how wonderful and clever she is
 - able girls also need their effort recognised by their parents, even if they usually do well

Teachers

- encourage girls to evaluate and praise their each other's work, so that praise doesn't always come from someone in authority
- help students to feel satisfied: 'I expect you felt really pleased with this when you finished it'
- find something to praise every day, and include humour, sociability and creativity
- if a girl rejects all praise, showering her with it won't work; select one thing you find truly pleasing, and repeat it three times every day for three weeks, so that she begins to believe and trust that it is true
- take care: public recognition of success may lead to perfectionism and praise-dependency

5 Spend time with her

I know my dad loves me, but I hardly know him. I know he works hard to support us, but we hardly ever talk. It makes me feel as if I'm incomplete.

Research shows that children like to have their parents around, even if they're not actively doing anything with them. Girls like to see fathers as much as mothers where possible, and even teenagers are reported to want to see more of their parents, even if it is a case of being 'seen but not heard'!

British men and women work longer hours than in most other countries in Europe. This means they spend less time at home with their families. Girls cannot feel loved and lovable, believed in and believable, respected and respectable, if the people on whom they depend seem not to care. Only if the important adults in a girl's life give her time and attention can she feel validated and develop any kind of self-worth. Meeting your daughter's need for stress-free time with you, when you give her your undivided attention, will help her feel confident and significant.

Parents

- presents are no substitute for presence: don't try to buy your way out of being unavailable
- spend time finding out what your daughter thinks, and talking about what she has been doing
- play with her, watch her doing or join in her favourite activity, or say: 'I'd love you to talk to me while I wash the car/peel the vegetables', etc.
- keep every promise to visit, and stay in regular touch

- quiet time together can be as valuable as action-packed time
- try to do any office work you need to do at home in family space so that you're not cut off
- put the answerphone on

Teachers

- don't let bad behaviour, or learned helplessness (to which girls are particularly prone), be the only way to get your attention
- if a student wants a conversation at an inconvenient moment, suggest another time when you can listen to her properly
- each week, identify the retiring girls and organise with colleagues to make a special effort to speak to and engage with each one every day

6 Communicate with touch and words

Touch may often convey what you want to say better than words. It is far less open to misinterpretation, and need only take a second. The positive touch is, for example, a full embrace or an arm round your daughter's shoulders; it can ask for nothing in return or seek a simple sign from her that she feels the same way. It can show to her and others that she belongs to you. It can heal an argument and say you're sorry. It can console her after a disappointment, demonstrate your pride or be a show of equality and partnership.

So touch can reassure as well as relax. But it can also hurt. Hitting even a young girl will usually hurt her deeply, and simply pushing your daughter away when you're angry can be a signal interpreted by her as deep rejection. A girl who is never touched can feel ignored and ashamed of herself, and may become easy prey to inappropriate attentions from others.

Parents

- little strokes of your daughter's forehead, head or hands at bedtime or while watching TV - or just sitting close - can be a way to get the habit of touch back into your family if it has disappeared
- experiment with using touch as an alternative to words
- some children don't like too many cuddles; don't force it, just find other ways to get close, to experience togetherness and show your love

Teachers

- child protection issues make many teachers reluctant to touch children; in any case, as girls grow older, it becomes increasingly difficult and inappropriate to do so; just standing close to a student as you look over her work can show you accept her and feel no discomfort in her presence
- some teachers greet their class of young children individually as they enter the classroom, inviting each pupil to choose how to say hello each time - with a smile, a handshake, or nothing at all if that's how they feel that day

7 Respect her right to know

Most children thrive when they feel secure and can predict what is going to happen to them. The unexpected can be very unsettling. Sometimes things happen out of the blue and any adults involved can be equally surprised. But more often the adults know in advance and simply fail to keep a child properly informed.

Children need to be able to make sense of their world. If they can't, they live in social and emotional chaos. They make sense of life both through the patterns that emerge when life is ordered and each day has a predictable shape to it and through being given explanations when changes occur. Young children's brains develop by constructing meaningful patterns, so every child needs to make sense of knowledge and events before she can learn.

When you explain things to your daughter, you show that you respect her right to know, empathise with her need to make sense of her world, respect her ability to understand, and trust her with the information.

Parents

- try to tell your daughter about things before they happen, and as they happen, and explain afterwards why something happened
- tell her about your own feelings, and discuss hers
- she can be told about variations in routines, when partners and relationships change, and have any absences explained
- inform her about decisions taken, and the reasons for them