

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Positive Parenting

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

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About the Book

Positive Parenting is a parenting book with a difference. It does not tell you how and when to potty-train or introduce your child to solid food. Instead, it argues that what really matters is helping children to grow up feeling secure and good about themselves, enabling them to gain positive self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance.

Knowing and liking yourself is so often the key to success in life - affecting personal relationships, general motivation and success in work. Using key words like 'praise', 'play', 'time', 'touch' and 'talk', this book speaks to new and experienced parents alike about what helps children develop and what blocks progress. No matter how difficult parenting may have seemed in the past, *Positive Parenting* offers a clear and simple way forward in the most influential relationship of all - that between parent and child.

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[Diagram 1.](#) Discipline Styles and the Development of Self-Esteem

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Positive Parenting

Raising Children
with
Self-Esteem

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer



For Stephen, Georgia, Julia and Greg.

Preface

What I have to say in this book is a personal statement of my beliefs about what really matters in relationships with children. It represents the distillation of twenty-five years of trial and error, observation and contemplation - growing alongside first, my two stepchildren and then my own two children; of working with gifted children and their families; and of sharing experiences with a large number of other mothers, fathers and friends - sometimes singly and sometimes in groups. I believe that what I have discovered is common to all of us. I wish I had known what I now know twenty years ago. I am sharing it more widely in the hope that it will help others to negotiate more happily and confidently the minefield of parenthood. If we gain a sense of direction, and thereby raise our own personal self-esteem, we will be better able to reach our ultimate goal which has to be: raising children with self-esteem.

Introduction

Children - like adults - perform best when they feel good about themselves. And they feel good about themselves when someone tells them they have done well, are likeable and are good to be with. Only when a child is convinced that her parents love, like and cherish her, and are on her side, can she develop true self-esteem, and go on to become a self-confident, self-reliant and happy person.

This is a child-rearing book with a difference. It will not tell you how and when to potty-train, when to move your toddler into a bed, or when to introduce solid food. There are many excellent books offering advice about these matters. In fact, they are so comprehensive that some people looking at them, especially when they are pushed to their limits, feel inadequate and a failure. The very act of opening the book can ruin your confidence in sorting the problem out for yourself.

What is different about this book is that it concentrates on the relationship rather than the mechanics of child-rearing. It contains two simple core messages: first, trust yourself and your own instincts; and second, it is not so much *what* you do as *how you do it* that is important. Getting the approach right is much easier than most parents would believe. Once you realise that doing the best for your child comes down to creating in them self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance, then everything falls much more easily into place. What really matters is the relationship you build with your child. And it is surprisingly

easy to help your child have these 'self' qualities. The key words, or things to remember, can be related to the word '**Expertise**', using it as a memory jogger. This is explained in [Chapter Five](#).

The book aims both to **encourage** and **empower**.

It will **encourage** because, no matter how many mistakes you have made in the past, or over how long a period, it offers a clear way forward. You can put the past behind you, forget guilt and apply this programme. It is, essentially, a valuable **tool kit**. But it can also act as a **repair kit** for anyone who is flat on the floor, whose children's behaviour is so awful it doesn't even get a mention in the 'bibles', for anyone who has lost all sense of direction and belief in their parental talents and even in themselves.

It will **empower**, because it hands the initiative back to you, the parent. It says that you can do it and that you don't need to lean on experts or books. The expertise lies within you. You should use the natural authority which you have as a parent. You should trust your own ability to decide what is the right thing to do, provided you have paid attention to the three targets - self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance. Immediately, your own self-esteem should improve and a virtuous circle can begin.

What is the book's message?

This book is all about self-esteem: what it is; why it is important to have it; what can go wrong if you don't have it; and, most important, how you can help your children to develop it. Unfortunately, in this society we seem to find it so much easier to do people down - to criticise, scold and reject - rather than to approve, praise and enjoy.

After twenty-five years of being both a mother and a stepmother and making mistakes; of reflecting on the behaviour of adults and trying to locate the source of their

difficulties; and, more recently, of working with groups of parents to develop a better understanding of child-rearing issues and parenting styles, I have come to the conclusion that these three attributes are the starting points for happiness and security in later life.

'Self-esteem' is something of a growth industry at the moment. Rightly, more and more people are talking about and accepting the importance of having self-esteem for building successful work and other relationships and for having a fulfilled life. Lack of self-esteem is given increasingly as the reason why so many young people get themselves on the wrong side of the law, and why apparently successful media and business personalities are none the less unhappy and seem to be on an eternal search for the ultimate challenge, experience or security. There are now several management training courses based on improving self-esteem. Assertiveness courses, designed to develop personal confidence in both men and women, are also mushrooming. The therapy and counselling 'industries' would not be the size they are if everyone had a healthy and solid self-image. In all these contexts, self-esteem is treated as something which is only significant for adults. But if having good feelings about yourself, having enough self-confidence to meet and manage new experiences and take risks, and having the resources and resilience to cope with personal setbacks, are all so important, why not apply preventive strategies where the problem really starts - in childhood?

Having good self-esteem means that you have confidence in yourself: you know who you are, you like who you are, and you are content to face the world as you are. Self-esteem is the best gift any parent can give their child. Knowing yourself and liking yourself is so often the key to success in many modes of life - affecting personal relationships, general motivation and success in work. At the other end of the scale, low self-esteem can cause great

anguish, heartache, under-achievement, bad behaviour, relationship problems and even depression.

Your own self-esteem is important, too. It is vital to look after yourself at the same time. Parents must continue to 'grow' alongside their offspring. You cannot put yourself into cold storage for the duration. You have to work at maintaining your own feelings of competence and self-esteem. If you are feeling low and inadequate, you are far less likely to help your child to flourish. Using the guidance on how to help your child feel good about herself, and inviting you to apply some of it to yourself as well as to your child, the book asks you to believe in yourself. Trust your instincts; trust your ability to do the job successfully; reclaim your authority; and rediscover and trust your common sense.

This is a practical handbook; but is not a detailed route map, giving you the answer to every little problem on the sometimes fraught and winding path of parenthood. It is, instead, more like a guide to map-reading, letting you choose the route. Feelings of self-esteem are influenced both by how the key people in your life relate to and treat you, and by your own achievements. By making parents more aware, through practical advice and examples, of what sort of behaviour makes anyone, regardless of age, feel good about themselves; and more aware of what behaviour acts as a 'put down' and damages feelings of self-worth, the book's purpose is then to pass the initiative back to you and say: do it your way. All you need to do is keep the three key targets in mind, and to check you are not breaking any of the ground rules.

The detail of child-rearing matters a great deal less than giving them this firm, secure foundation. Letting children know how far they can go, that there are limits to what you can give and what you will tolerate, and providing them with a structure and pattern of routines, will help to develop mutual trust and respect. This is the starting point

for developing a strong and healthy identity. Encouraging feelings of self-worth in children starts with who they are – the personality that they were born with, encompassing their likes and dislikes. Everybody is different: you as a parent or carer have your own personality. You are who you are: so there can be no one way to bring up a child. This can be done, and should be done, in a million and one different ways. There are no magic answers. You have to discover what works for you, making mistakes along the way. That is inevitable and necessary. Provided that you pay attention to the fundamental rules which encourage self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance, and you are aware of the things which help or hinder children growing up feeling valued and wanted, a key message from this book is: it's OK to do it *your* way.

The main theme of this book is very simple, and is based on common sense rather than on any fancy 'ology'. Indeed, many parents will already be implementing some or all of the message, either intuitively or intentionally. What is new, I believe, is putting the ideas together to create a coherent framework which can act as a point of reference on most of the issues which arise in parenting, and can reveal some of the less obvious tactics we use to boost, or to put down, others.

Getting back in touch with our common sense will help us to:

- identify our own values;
- provide us and our children with a sense of direction;
- accept responsibility for guiding and leading our children into adulthood;
- avoid the extremes of child-rearing fashion and identify a more sustainable middle way.

We need, above all, to rediscover our natural parental authority.

How to use the book

Simple ideas are usually best presented in a simple way, and this is what I have attempted to do.

[Chapter One](#) looks at how, despite the special difficulties facing parents today, there is a way through which can rebuild our confidence and trust in ourselves.

[Chapters Two](#) and [Three](#), 'The Tool Kit' and 'The Repair Kit', present an outline of the approach in a way which I hope is easy to understand. From then on, the book is 'layered'. In other words, the further you read into it, the deeper you can delve, moving beyond the core points and into some of the more complex dynamics of the parent-child relationship.

[Chapter Four](#) looks at where we, as parents, fit in. You could stop reading here and, I hope, still come out with some useful ideas.

[Chapter Five](#) introduces the Key Words which not only reinforce and distil the main message but also act as memory joggers. The words on their own say quite a lot, and each is followed by a short section which expands on the concept being presented, starting off with the main points and going on to consider them in more detail. Each 'key word' applies equally to the parent/carer and to the child. Each section is therefore split into two, looking first at how the word relates to the child's needs, and then how it relates to those of the parent(s). You can read as much or as little as you want to here, too.

[Chapter Six](#), 'Words Matter', is for those who want to read and consider further still, and shows in more detail how and why we use words to put children down, and suggests other less hurtful ways of saying things.

[Chapters Seven](#) and [Eight](#) attempt to unravel the complexities of power, commitment and discipline in parenting, while still focusing on building self-esteem as the central aim.

[Chapter Nine](#) summarises what is meant by ‘positive parenting’ in the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ behaviour circles which illustrate the cumulative effect of parental attitudes on the child.

Some repetition, therefore, is inevitable. Writing the book in this way I try to allow different people to take what they want from it; and also to reinforce, progressively, the ideas and their importance.

A simple truth can also be profound, as I hope I shall show.

One final word. Nobody should be put off by the number of suggestions for action. They are not all meant to be tried, and certainly not all of them at one go. The examples are given primarily for illustration and not for direction. As is suggested in [Chapter Three](#), when you ask yourself at the end of the day what you have done to make your child feel good about herself, if you can give more positive than negative answers, that is good enough.

One

Trust Yourself: It's OK To Do It *Your* Way

BEING A PARENT today is much harder than it was even ten years ago. There are several reasons why this is so.

Society is changing fast. Many people feel they have no coherent or relevant model for bringing up children in the 1990s. Today's parents will have come mostly from the smaller families more typical of recent times. While small families often provide greater material comforts and emotional benefits, the older children are usually so close in age to the younger ones that they either cannot, or are not needed to, help bring up or mind their much younger brothers or sisters. They therefore gain no early experience of child care which can be applied later with their own children - an experience which most world cultures offer. At the same time, and partly as a result of the same trend, the extended family is not there to play the same guiding or supporting role that it used to.

Many more people today are parenting alone, for a wide variety of reasons. The decisions and lifestyle changes which are entailed are so significant that they will inevitably cause some measure of stress and anxiety. Children make big demands, either directly, or indirectly through poor behaviour. Unsettling changes will increase those demands as they seek reassurance. If there is only one parent to meet these sometimes intense demands, the pressure will be that much more concentrated.

These social changes are happening in a context which puts even more pressure on parents. Today, we live in a climate of 'professionalism'. Having lost confidence in ourselves, not only do we look increasingly to 'professionals' to give us the answers to each and every one of our problems, but we also have ever higher standards and expectations of what we want to achieve in all the things we do. But we cannot meet these standards in everything we set out to do. When we inevitably fail, we are prone not just to guilt but also to further feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. Women especially can demand far too much of themselves.

In addition to this, many parents are trying to function in an authority void. In rejecting (rightly) the strict disciplinarian method of bringing up children, some parents have thrown away their authority and responsibility at the same time. Others have just lost their sense of direction and confidence in themselves. Someone who is confused and unsure will not command authority. Those who have consciously rejected the adult control which they themselves experienced in childhood in favour of a more child-centred approach now seem equally uncertain as to whether this alternative really works or gives children the best tools for coping and fitting in with the demands of education, work or families made on them later.

In the area of parenting, the relevant professionals are also telling us that what we do in these early years can have a big impact on the later personality of our child. This makes us increasingly anxious about making mistakes. Mothers are particularly prone to this type of anxiety. Believing it is our key job to provide our families with health and happiness, we not only worry about doing the job well, but also about the risk of causing psychological damage to our children.

And even that is not all. The state of marriages and partnerships is another pressure on us. We are all now constantly exposed to the expectation that we should have a high-quality sexual, emotional and social relationship with our partners and be 'happy'. The growing social acceptability of divorce and single parenthood seduces us into weighing up the state of our relationships more frequently, because if we judge that we do not have an ideal relationship, we have the option to abandon ship, get out and find something better elsewhere. With that possibility always hanging over both partners in the relationship, even if it is subconscious, men and women are having to bring up their children in a potentially explosive environment of insecurity and failure in which we demand too much and see too little. We are in danger of ignoring the obvious. Not only can we undervalue ourselves - our instincts and abilities - but worse, we can fail to realise, as we try to square the circle of modern life, that our children have basic needs too.

Just as adults perform best when they feel good about themselves and when others have shown they appreciate, love and care for them, so do children. A confident, trusting child, secure in her key relationships and conscious of her particular abilities and what it is that makes her unique, will play better, learn better, concentrate better and give, love and relate better. A child's sense of self develops from infancy. Therefore feelings about self-esteem, both good and bad, exist in childhood as strongly, or indeed more strongly, as they do in adulthood. Good self-esteem helps people to develop strong self-confidence. Self-confidence helps people become self-reliant and independent. These three attributes combine in individuals regardless of age to create human beings who are happy, productive, creative, flexible and, most important when considering the social context of our lives, giving.

These qualities lie at the heart of almost everything people say they want for themselves. Childhood is by far the best time to build self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance. If you do not obtain them then, it is much more difficult to acquire them as permanent features of yourself later. Where adults have relationship problems at home or at work, these are the things which they have often lacked. Where adults have other kinds of problems, and they are not handling them well, it is usually because their resilience and belief in themselves is low.

If you think of learning as human building blocks, these 'self' perceptions go down first and constitute a person's foundations. With strong foundations, we can weather the storms and earthquakes of life. Without them, we bend, creak, heave and crack. We can repair the cracks; but, if the foundations are weak, the cracks will only reappear. What this book sets out to do is show ways of laying these foundations.

As parents, if we want to find out how to be successful in our role, we need look no further than helping our children to develop confidence, self-reliance and, above all, good feelings about themselves. In terms of giving our children life-long advantages, anything else pales into insignificance. Other decisions in parenting, if they cannot be related to these objectives, are far less important. They are not worth getting fussed about. It matters far more that you:

- keep the parent-child relationship alive and on an even keel;
- maintain a consistent and predictable environment for your children;
- keep power play and damaging disputes to a minimum;
- demonstrate your commitment to them and show them that you understand them and are on their side.

There is no formula for being the perfect parent. There are no easy answers, and you will not find a convenient blueprint here. Success is much more about understanding and trusting yourself and your children, and bringing them up *your* way, consistently. You know your children better than anyone else can or does. You are able to do it, not because you are clever or good at it, not because you know the theory or the tricks, but because your children are yours. By showing that you understand them as only you can; by respecting their likes and dislikes and acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses which make them who they are; by treating them with the respect that we should all give to each other as human beings and demonstrating that you approve of them; you will help them to grow up with a strong sense of themselves, making them better able to withstand life's difficulties and to exploit life's challenges.

What we have to watch out for are the two demons: doubt and guilt. These are the two most destructive elements of any relationship. They are especially the enemies of a natural and fulfilled relationship with children, both because they reinforce uncertainty and insecurity and because they tempt you into an unhelpful regime of appeasement, or giving in. If we give in too often, we blur the boundaries. We teach our children that if they play on our guilt, they get their way. A small amount of guilt is healthy, but too much is definitely counter-productive. We all do make mistakes - through our over-concern, through stress or marital and relationship problems, through having to meet other family needs which often conflict. It is all right to make mistakes. If you can accept that you can mess things up, and the sky does not fall in when it happens, you will teach your children by example that it is also safe for them to make mistakes. If, on the other hand, you get crushed with a sense of failure, you teach them that making mistakes is something

shameful and therefore to be avoided at all costs. Being able to take risks, and to accept both the possibility of and responsibility for making mistakes, is an absolute prerequisite for learning and healthy development.

Some of our mistakes are minor and do not matter. Others can cause temporary harm or hurt. But there are two vital things to remember that should relieve the agony of guilt. One is that, in the vast majority of parent-child relationships, you can make amends and undo the mistake even quite long after - so great is a child's need to be loved, trusted and respected by you - by apologising to them and repairing their self-image which will be damaged as a result. For years and years they can be the most forgiving creatures. They have to rely on you, so they want and need to believe in you.

The second vital thing is that if you are unpleasant to children, and have not seriously hurt them emotionally or physically, there is in place a cushion of love, a suspension of judgement, and so strong a wish, or need, to believe in you, that they and their relationship with you can take several knocks without significant damage. The danger only comes when that reserve of giving you the benefit of the doubt is used up. Then, to protect themselves from the uncomfortable conclusion that they are not worth loving, they separate themselves from you emotionally and are no longer willing to play any part in a relationship which exposes them to such anguish. This is what Bruno Bettelheim, the eminent child psychologist, and D.W. Winnicott, a paediatrician and psychoanalyst, meant when they talked about being 'a good enough' mother or parent. Provided you are not near the danger point, and you have loved your children in a way which has convinced them of it, there is room for error, and repair, repeatedly.

So, trust yourself. You and your children have a unique relationship. And they adore you, love you and need you more than you can know. No-one else can take your place

as their mother or father. This is the fundamentally encouraging reality. Each relationship has to be not only different but also unique. You are you, with all of your strengths and weaknesses which you carry with you; and the child has her own unique personality from day one, which can be influenced, but you try to change it at your peril! You have to work with what you have collectively got. Quite apart from that, there are partners and siblings who will alter the chemistry of what's possible to do within your family. No-one can tell you precisely what will work for you two or even, at a more complex level, what will work within the whole family - taking other family members' values and boundaries or tolerances into account. Only you can know all this and put it all into the equation of compromise. The answer does not lie out there in an encyclopaedia. It lies, and has to lie, within ourselves. You have to work out what works for you. And what works for you is OK. If it is working, don't listen to anyone else telling you that you should be doing it differently. If it is working, without you needing to behave like a dictator, and your child does not have significant problems of bad or anxiety-driven behaviour, it is probably working because you are getting the essentials right - giving your child love, respect and security. The finer details do not matter.

But the essentials do matter. This book presents these as a tool kit, and summarises the necessary techniques through the scheme of 'The Expertise' in [Chapter Five](#). It shows you how to *get* 'The Expertise', and *forget* the guilt!