

THE NEW SELF-ESTEEM: Feeling Worthy from the Inside Out

by Aaron Cooper, PhD | Licensed Clinical Psychologist

My son was seven years old when we joined 13 other soccer families at a local restaurant for the end-of-the-season awards luncheon. We were novices at this; it was Shawn's first year on the team. Remembering awards luncheons I'd attended during high school, I expected there'd be recognition for Best Player, Most Improved Player, Most Sportsmanlike Player—all the usual honors. After the obligatory pizza and ice cream, the coach called us to attention and delivered predictable words about teamwork and effort and "it's not just about winning." Then he opened a large carton and pulled out a shiny gold trophy. "All our boys are winners," he declared, and summoned each to the front to receive identical awards. I beamed with pride and looked on with approval. As a child psychologist in 1991, I was a foot soldier in the army of mental health and education professionals devoted to nurturing children's fragile egos through both carefully chosen words of

affirmation and shielding from disappointment and defeat. I was also a baby boomer parent, a member of the generation whose enthusiastic embrace of self-esteem catapulted the concept into the influential movement still prevalent today. Branded the "Me Generation," boomers brought to parenting the values of self-expression and self-interest emblematic of the years they came of age. Influenced by the "question authority" ethos of the Vietnam War and Watergate era and symbolized by hippie culture, Woodstock, and the Summer of Love, boomers found favor in a child-rearing approach that eschewed responsibility and restraint for an emphasis on providing feel-good moments in the service of building self-esteem. "Good job" became the watchword for even the smallest accomplishments, "amazing" the word *du jour* when parents spoke of their kids to friends and family, or assured the youngsters themselves how awesome they



were. A survey conducted in the mid-1990s found that 80% of parents believed their kids should be praised as a way of building confidence and motivation. It was a campaign to promote *feeling worthy from the outside in*.

Under the sway of the self-esteem movement, boomers began shielding their kids from and cushioning their kids against disappointment, hurt, sadness, upset—all the negative emotions. They didn't want youngsters to feel discouraged or defeated, fearing such moments would deflate self-worth. More than anything else, they wanted to keep their children happy, mistaking a smile for psychological well-being.¹ College administrators began talking about helicopter parents, the ones who “hovered” over their sons’ and daughters’ academic and campus lives, running interference to cushion all blows and maintain a parental safety net against adversities large and small. Some schools created the position of Dean of Parent Relations to manage heretofore unseen degrees of parental intrusiveness. Approaching the new millennium, helicopter parents were observed hovering across the full spectrum of childhood as parenting came to look a lot like cultivating orchids in a climate-controlled hothouse, certainly for large segments of the middle- and upper-middle classes.

Has it succeeded, all the praise and protection parents bestowed? Can we say that the self-esteem movement has delivered on its promise? Are the offspring of the boomers—Generation X and later the millennials—more confident, resilient, and psychologically sturdier than the boomers themselves, or generations before them? Research has yet to answer these questions.

What we do know anecdotally is that the steady flow of “good job” and “you’re amazing” seems to have produced two generations hooked on praise. It’s called contingent self-esteem, when feelings of self-worth depend on external sources of validation. Unintended consequences of so much back-slapping have been reported in corporate settings, where overtaxed managers have adjusted their practices to accommodate younger workers’ need for regular, positive feedback. Stories abound of job-hopping by Gen X and millennial employees when they don’t receive praise early and often. Coaches have complained about the number of athletes who find it hard to accept corrective feedback. Over the same period, rates of youth anxiety (and medication prescriptions issued for its treatment) have surged, beginning in elementary school and extending into college. Anxiety has outpaced depression, relationship problems, and other complaints at college counseling centers, where staffing can’t keep pace with demand. Might contingent self-esteem and over-involved parenting—the ever-present scaffolding of external praise and protection—be implicated in all this?

Responding to these developments, psychologists and educators in recent years have swung the other way and began encouraging parents to rein in excessive praise. A Pew Research Study published in December, 2015 found that the percentage of parents saying they overdid the praise jumped from 24% for the boomers to 40% for the millennials. There’s now widespread skepticism about the merits of promoting feeling worthy from the outside in. Which is why child-rearing

is poised for something different, an approach that flips the paradigm and promotes *feeling worthy from the inside out*. It's time for a New Self-Esteem.

I CAN BE (WHO I AM)

Justin (not his real name) sits in my office round-shouldered and hunched forward, his palms pressed between his knees. At 17 and a high school senior, he's soft spoken and gentler than most of the boys I counsel, careful with his words as though not wanting to offend. Tall and classically handsome, he's plagued by anxiety. In a family counseling session, his parents explain that Justin's symptoms began at the start of sophomore year when he sometimes felt so anxious before an exam or a cross-country meet that he vomited up his breakfast. While his parents describe it to me, Justin looks sad and worried.

"We always praised him, from the time he was little," his mother says. "We praise all our kids. When they do well in school, we tell them how proud we are of them. Justin has a shelf full of cross-country trophies. I don't understand why his self-esteem is so low."

What their sad-faced son gradually revealed were his father's regular reminders that his grades ought to be better, that his older brother's achievement exceeded his own (both academically and athletically), and that he was expected to follow in the family tradition of matriculating into a first tier college. By the time the family came to counseling, Justin had already applied to sixteen schools and feared his father's wrath if he were turned down from where Dad most wanted him

to go. I came to believe it was the burden of Dad's expectations that had bent Justin's shoulders into his customary hunch. Despite his strengths and the admirable qualities apparent to me, Justin's father was unable to accept him just as he was.

The first of three pillars of the New Self-Esteem—I *can be (who I am)*—recognizes that children need to be accepted for who they are, with their unique temperaments and personalities, strengths and weaknesses, talents and interests. If kids could put it into words, it would sound something like this: "I feel good about myself when I know my parents accept and celebrate the person I am, not some make-believe person they want me to be." Alas, this is no small challenge these days, with countless middle-class parents rearing kids from a playbook built on the false premise that there are limited paths toward successful, happy lives. A parent's task, according to the playbook, is to guide their children onto one of those paths, whether it's a good fit or not. Entire industries have sprung up to support parents in a kind of youth makeover—tutors, coaches and personal trainers, specialized camps and test prep centers, learning specialists and neuropsychologists who, through testing, identify and remediate a panoply of weaknesses whether significant or not, consultants who guide parents in procuring special advantage in school to give kids a leg up—all designed to shape sons and daughters into the children parents want them to be. Can anyone recognize the original child under so much nip and tuck?

"When you parent, it's crucial you realize you

aren't raising a 'mini-me,' but a spirit throbbing with its own signature," writes Shefali Tsabary, PhD, author of *The Conscious Parent*.ⁱⁱ "For this reason, it's important to separate who you are from who each of your children is. Children aren't ours to possess or own in any way. When we know this in the depths of our soul, we tailor our raising of them to *their* needs, rather than molding them to fit *our* needs."

Easier said than done. Rearing children has in recent decades become a complicated stew. Prior to the Industrial Revolution and early decades of the 20th century, parents accepted the received roadmap to the future that dictated sons' and daughters' lives. There weren't many choices to be had; familial and class barriers allowed few opportunities for advancement or a different way of life. While parental anxiety has been part of raising children for hundreds of years, the task was in some ways simpler when generation after generation followed similar paths. Much of that changed beginning in the sixties with the growth of the middle class, women entering the workforce, the rise of family planning, geographic mobility uprooting custom and kin, shifting sexual and cultural mores, and expanding opportunity through higher education. The word *parent* became a verb around 1970, reflecting a burgeoning industry responding to a need parents felt for guidance and support. With so many options available to youth as they approached adulthood—where to live, what work to pursue, whether and whom to marry, what values to embrace—parents saw that risk was no longer limited to acts of God

and government; so much could go wrong. With all the uncertainty about their children's *tomorrow*, parents sought some measure of control by investing in their kids' *today*. Following decades in which youth enjoyed a generous helping of unstructured time—the mid-century years when play was king—in the late 20th century childhood became a kind of first career. Youth no longer sweated away in factories circa 1890, but by 1990 many found themselves stretched to capacity as parents laid out a preferred mix of activities hoping for preferred outcomes years later. Academic and athletic achievement rose to the top of this early career ladder, with the arts following close behind. Seven out of ten children now participate in childhood sports. One wonders if athletics can be a natural fit for so many, or are we witnessing the playbook effect? Early learning gadgets and training programs proliferate on toy store shelves while high schools offer increasing numbers of advanced placement (AP) courses; the fixation on academic achievement starts early and never stops. And imbued in it all is the spirit of winning. "How did you do on the test?" parents ask at the end of the school day, not "What did you learn?" At weekend soccer games, moms and dads shout from the sidelines, urging harder and tougher play, urging kids to score. Competitiveness of course is encouraged by the playbook, but it's not congruent with every child's nature.

And what of "average" youth, a vanishing species within the middle class? In 2007, I drove past an elementary school whose large marquee proclaimed: "Where every child is a superstar." Unless the bell curve has been declared a myth, children can't *all* be

RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR PARENTS

- Cooper, A. and Keitel, E. (2008). *I Just Want My Kids To Be Happy*. Late August Press.
- Dreikurs, R. and Stolz, V. (1990). *Children: The Challenge*. Plume.
- Dweck, C. (2016). *Mindset*. Ballantine.
- Gottman, J. and Declaire, J. (1997). *Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child*. Fireside.
- Lythcott-Haims, J. (2015). *How To Raise An Adult*. St. Martins Press.
- Siegel, D. and Hartzell, M. (2014). *Parenting From The Inside Out*. Tarcher/Penguin.
- Tsebary, Shefali. (2010). *The Conscious Parent*. Namaste Publishing.
- Tsebary, Shefali. (2017). *The Awakened Family*. Penguin.

exceptional. Yet many parents, and the industries that enable them, cling to the illusion that the potential is ever-present for *all* sons and daughters to be more than they are, better than they are, closer to the vision constructed for them. It's an illusion used to justify the makeover project. And when kids fall short, parents rarely rethink their expectations. Instead they condemn the curriculum or demand a change of teacher or coach, or they hire tutors and insist on unreasonable amounts of study or practice. It's all designed to spare parents from having to confront what in their minds is the catastrophe of average.

As parents, we often don't recognize the conscious and unconscious forces standing in the way of accepting our children just as they are. Am I reacting against what I disliked in my own upbringing? Do I unconsciously hope my children will provide the gratifications that otherwise elude me in life? Am I encouraging without reflection the superficial values of popularity, status, and appearance that promote contingent self-esteem? How easy it is to embrace a vision of our children's future that reflects our unexamined fantasies of who we need our children to be, while how hard it is to let go of that vision, to grieve our agendas and open our hearts to the youngsters wishing to be accepted for who they truly are.

Accepting our children as they are does not mean abandoning the all-important task of shaping and molding their moral and character development. All kids are diamonds in the rough, needing us to guide them when it comes to differentiating right from wrong and good from bad, and instruct them in the

pro-social behaviors of kindness and compassion. It's not so much a makeover as an education in what it means to be an ethically upright citizen of the world. This, in fact, may be our most important task, too often eclipsed by the imperatives of the playbook.

Once youth reach early adolescence, the peer group becomes as or more influential than parents in shaping feelings of worthiness. *Am I like others? Do I fit in? Am I acceptable to my peers?* It's a fraught business at that stage, with self-esteem as volatile as a crazy day on Wall Street. Social media has become the salient force in this drama. As they peruse Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and more, youth tend to make upward comparisons, measuring themselves against those who look more attractive or whose active social lives appear more exciting than their own. They forget that people curate online posts to include only their most flattering photos, only their most exciting moments. Social media makes it hard to develop self-acceptance around body and facial features; society's narrow definition of beauty pops up constantly on our kids' screens—all day, every day. University of California, San Francisco researcher Erin Vogel, PhD found that after viewing Facebook profiles portraying others with very active social lives or very attractive photos and high social status, people reported lower self-esteem and more negative opinions of themselves. In one estimate, half a million girls have posted online videos of themselves asking viewers to vote if they're ugly or not. Imagine the blow from inadequate numbers of "likes," or unkind words posted by insensitive strangers. In the face of an unforgiving social media world, accepting our kids

just the way they are becomes a crucial counterbalance against online forces undermining self-worth.

"Without our realizing, we so often endorse our children for their actions, rather than for just being," writes Dr. Tsabary. "Celebrating our children's being means allowing them to exist without the snares of our expectations. It's to revel in their existence without them having to do a single thing, prove anything or accomplish any kind of goal."

How can we "revel in their existence," accustomed as we are to reveling in their performance—the grades they earn, the backflips they complete, the number and status of their friends. How is "reveling in their existence" expressed? By telling them how appreciated they are when they're doing nothing but daydreaming out the window. By telling them how delighted you feel just to drive with them in the car. By demonstrating curiosity about their thoughts, feelings, and dreams—without judging, correcting or advising—so that they know in a deep way how interested you are in them. By telling them how happy you are to greet them when they wake up in the morning, or when they return home from school in the afternoon. By telling them what pleasure you feel just to see them enjoy whatever pursuits bring them satisfaction, without regard to resume-building, winning, or otherwise getting ahead. Words like these are part of an overall strategy designed to promote *I can be (who I am)*—a process that contributes to feeling worthy from the inside out.

I CAN DO (FOR MYSELF)

“Kaitlyn phones or texts me all the time,” her mother proudly asserts during a family counseling session. “She texts from school whenever she has a question or needs help. I love how close we are, especially after hearing so many stories about teenage daughters fighting with their moms.” Slouched in her chair, Kaitlyn wears a bored expression and rarely looks up. Her mother gave up a career to raise three children, throwing herself into child-rearing with the same commitment and energy she’d once given to her graduate studies in finance. Now both parents worry that this daughter, a sophomore in community college who commutes to school from the family home, has little social life and seems afraid to venture out and meet people. “Folks talk about self-esteem,” Kaitlyn’s father says. “She could use more of that.”

Kaitlyn may be no different than many young people of any era: close to family, somewhat introverted, lacking social confidence. What is different is that she’s grown up in a time when cellphones serve as an extended umbilical cord, keeping youth tethered to parents and home in ways that can subvert their developing autonomy. From an early age, Kaitlyn had become unusually dependent on her parents handling challenges I suspected she could have handled herself. It was a comparatively short leash that both generations enabled, reflecting the coming together of smartphone technology and helicopter parenting. Boomers, by comparison, growing up before cellphones, enjoyed a longer leash and the freedom to face on their own more of the ordinary challenges of everyday life.

Not so for their children, the Gen Xers (and later the millennials), generations who came to rely on mom and dad doing for them what they could have done for themselves. Too much helping and shielding undermines the second pillar of the New Self-Esteem: *I can do (for myself)*.

To feel worthy from the inside out, we need to know we’re capable; we need to feel a sense of agency in the world. It’s a capacity that begins when we’re babies, when we discover that by crawling across the floor we can reach the desired toy. Just as quickly we learn that there’s rarely a straight line between our desire and its fulfillment, that varieties of obstacles—forms of ordinary childhood adversity—block our way. That’s when we whine and cry and turn to our parents for help. When they resist the helping impulse and allow us to struggle and bring our own resources to bear—this can take time; parents need to be patient—we often overcome those obstacles and discover *I can do (for myself)*.

At age 10, Luke was sent to summer camp in California. He was assigned to a cabin with six other boys. On his first night, he couldn’t fall asleep when several of his cabin mates persisted in noisy conversation. After tossing and turning, he did what he was accustomed to doing back home: he reached for his cellphone. It was after 11 p.m. when he woke his parents in Chicago and whispered a cry for help. His father offered comfort and then phoned the camp’s after-hours emergency number to report Luke’s distress. Minutes later, a counselor descended on the cabin and reprimanded the chatty boys; Luke got to sleep. For Dad, it was a victory. For Luke, probably not. Had

Dad refrained from rescuing his son in a moment of adversity, Luke might have spoken up assertively and insisted that the others quiet down—a valuable skill that undergirds *I can do (for myself)*. Or he might have left the cabin to seek a counselor’s assistance—another life skill, knowing when and how to ask for help. Or he might have simply tolerated his temporary adversity and discovered he’s capable of facing and surviving an unpleasant situation, which is how youth build resilience. Dad’s well-intentioned helpfulness robbed from Luke the *I can do (for myself)* experience.

Our need to see ourselves as our children’s loving shepherd makes it hard to step aside and let them struggle in the face of ordinary adversity. How easily we’re tempted, and how quickly we succumb, to doing for the kids what they could do for themselves. Working parents in particular often feel a twinge of guilt and compensate for their hours away—“see how involved I am in your life”—with so much helping, solving and advising. Stay-at-home parents do the same as a way of embellishing their job description and assuring their relevance in their children’s lives. There’s an illusion of effective parenting in this over-doing, an illusion that offers comfort especially to those moms and dads whose career or marriage or social life may largely disappoint.

When parents ask their kids, “What do you think should be done?” after hearing a report of some difficulty with a friend or classmate, or any sort of misstep whether accidental or not, the youngsters typically generate reasonable and useful ideas, or at least a kernel that can be refined with a parent’s help into something

more complete. I perceive a mix of surprise and delight in parents as they describe such moments to me, having recognized a capacity they didn’t realize existed in their sons and daughters, a capacity to apply, when pressed to do so, what they’ve learned—even when quite young—about how to remedy, correct and restore all sorts of situations. “What do you think should be done?” opens the door on a process that can leave children affirmed in their ability to contribute, to be helpful and sensible and sometimes even wise: *I can do (for myself)*.

Mothers in my counseling office seem compelled to check caller ID whenever their phone rings “because it might be one of the kids.” Some insist on keeping the phone on the table next to them rather than in their purse, “just in case.” “In case of what?” I often ask. “In case there’s an emergency.” In all the years since my clients began carrying cellphones, I have yet to witness an emergency. Instead, I hear: “The popsicles are on the top shelf behind the frozen vegetables,” or “I’ll help you find your backpack when I get home,” or “Don’t worry about those math problems. We can work on them together.” Without the instant availability of the cellphone, the child might have searched longer and harder until finding the popsicles on her own, a small but important victory. Achievements like these—they seem insignificant to us—are self-rewarding, requiring neither “good job” nor “you’re amazing” to be experienced by youth as a satisfying accomplishment. Stacking blocks into a tower *on one’s own*, finding a missing sweatshirt *on one’s own*, loading the dishwasher *on one’s own* are gratifying in themselves. And with each small achievement, feeling worthy develops from the

inside out. The Harvard Grant Study, a multi-decade project begun in 1938 to discover why some people are more successful than others, found that doing chores from a young age was one of two prerequisites for a happy and successful adult life (the other was receiving love). Much has been written about this study as support for the importance of developing a work ethic at an early age, but perhaps it's simply the sense that *I can do (for myself)* through the regular execution of chores that lays an essential foundation for a successful life. Yet over the past five decades, the percentage of middle-class families insisting on chores has dropped dramatically, chores being seen as a distraction from the more important dictates of the playbook.

Finally, there's the homework ritual, what one parenting expert christened "the new family dinner." How common it is for parents to modify meal plans and bedtimes and social activities—not just the kids' but their own—to choreograph and assist with their children's homework. I always wonder, Whose homework is it anyway? As discussed earlier, the stakes as parents perceive them are indeed very high. When it comes to academic achievement, the myth that parents cling to is that top grades lead to top colleges lead to top jobs lead to happy and successful lives. And so parents are loathe to leave homework to chance, to their kids' uncertain inclination on any given day to conscientiously apply themselves. What if parents played only a minor role, creating a quiet space without distraction or interruption, and let homework be the child's job? They'd complete it on their own—I *can do (for myself)*—and according to their capacity—I

can be (who I am)—or they'd face the consequences imposed by their teachers, learning whatever lessons might accrue therein. Either way, the youngsters stand to benefit.

I CAN TRUST (MY EMOTIONS)

When Shawn was five, we'd walk to a nearby playground that featured a challenging jungle gym. Sometimes a child would slip off the bars and plop onto the sand below. Many would run in tears to their parent—usually a mother—or she would hurry to them. Over time, I noticed a kind of standard response to the child in distress: "You're okay. You're not hurt. You're not bleeding and nothing is broken. You're okay. Go back and try again." Most kids continued to cry during and following their parent's words. Some parked themselves on the bench at their parent's side, others returned to the edge of the sandlot and gazed apprehensively toward the site of their tumble. Most took time to bounce back after their fall; many abandoned the climbing bars and switched to the slide or the swings.

One day, it was Shawn whose grip didn't hold. For reasons unknown to me now—whether I'd been reading something about empathic listening or had just witnessed an insensitive parent-child exchange—when Shawn slipped off the bars, I spoke to him in a way I'd never done before. He came toward me looking glum and defeated, and although he wasn't in tears, he seemed on the brink. I held out my arms and he moved into my embrace. That's when the tears began to flow. "You're really upset," I said. "That fall was pretty scary for you, wasn't it?" He nodded. "You

don't like to fall off the jungle gym. It's upsetting, and I bet it hurt when you fell." Again he nodded. "You're not sure you want to get back there. You're scared to try again." Maybe I repeated "you're scared" once or twice more. His crying ended and within seconds he pushed out of my arms, turned to peer at the sandlot, then ran back and climbed onto the bars. Whereas after previous falls he'd been slow to resume jungle gym play, this time was different. This time there was no visible sign of emotional distress after our brief exchange. He seemed restored.

I marveled later at the apparent healing power of what has come to be known as attunement. I had "tuned in" with accuracy to what Shawn was feeling, and in doing so he felt seen and heard. I guessed at his emotions and his nods told me I'd gotten it right. Had I said "you're okay," I would have created in him a disorienting confusion in which the emotions he felt on the *inside* would not have matched what he was hearing from me on the *outside*. Whom, and what, should he believe? Children tend to accept what parents say as truth, as accurate. Had I uttered "you're okay" or otherwise ignored his emotions, he likely would have concluded that feelings can't be trusted, that what he was experiencing within himself was somehow wrong or bad. From there, it's a small step to "*I am wrong or bad.*" Neuropsychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel, MD and educator Mary Hartzell, MEd, co-authors of *Parenting From the Inside Out*, capture this inevitability: "When a parent resonates with the child's emotions, the child's experience of himself is that he is 'good.'" Such parent-child attunement undergirds the third pillar of

the New Self-Esteem: *I can trust (my emotions).*

Teaching youth to trust their emotions begins when we invite them to notice their feelings, both the positive and negative, by giving those feelings "room to breathe." It's the opposite of what we typically do. Our kids usually experience us trying to make their difficult feelings go away. They rarely hear us welcome hurt, anger, sadness, upset, fear or shame into the room with words like, "Let's pay attention to the hurt," or "Tell me more about the sadness." Nor do they hear us speak much about our own difficult feelings (with the possible exception of anger). There's a kind of cultural imperative to hide negative emotions, as if disclosing them were impolite or an imposition on others. Our children watch us wear a smile when they sense, or know, that we're sad or upset. They see us become quiet or deny our emotions when they sense we're feeling something but saying nothing.

"We think we need to teach our children not to be afraid, not to be angry, or not to be sad," writes Dr. Tsabary. "Why shouldn't they be scared if they are scared? Why shouldn't they be sad if they are sad? Why would we ask them to dishonor their feelings? We help them most not when we try to banish their emotions but when we equip them to navigate such emotions."

Part of inviting our children's emotions into the room includes assigning their proper labels: *you feel glad, you feel sad, you feel scared*, etc. Accurate labels allow us to talk with precision about what our kids are feeling. Sadness is different than upset is different than disappointment

is different than discouraged. When we—or our children—can’t accurately label our feelings, we’re handicapped when it comes to making sense of moods and emotions, lacking thereby the understanding we need to guide actions, decisions, and beneficial course corrections. A vocabulary of emotion words supports emotional intelligence, what some experts say counts more than conventional intelligence in building happy, successful lives.

Next we model curiosity about the emotions we’ve invited into the room. *Where do you think the sadness is coming from?* Those are the words our kids should hear. *Where do you think the hurt is coming from?* We’re teaching them a critical mental process: reflecting on feelings in order to find the triggers behind them. We model a stance of non-judgmental, open-minded curiosity—*Where do you think so much anger is coming from?*—speaking in a tone that conveys that *feelings are always okay just the way they are*. We’re teaching something few people realize: behaviors aren’t always okay, but feelings are.

Finally, we normalize their emotions: *Of course you feel that way*, or *I would have felt that way when I was your age*, or *I’m sure many children would feel that way*. Normalization lets youth know that they aren’t unusual to feel as they do. “Knowing that my feelings are okay allows me to know that *I am okay*.”

Offering our kids attunement, like I did with Shawn after he tumbled onto the sand, is a powerful way to build parent-child connectedness. Most of us miss these opportunities because we become Mr. or Ms.

Fix-it when our kids are stirred up and in distress. We offer remedies or advice, sometimes a scolding (“Don’t use that angry tone in this house!”) or a preachy life lesson (“You should feel grateful for what’s good in your life instead of moping about feeling sad”). There’s no room in responses like these for our children to feel seen and heard. But with attunement, they know we’re on their side; they know we understand what they’re going through. When we’ve demonstrated again and again that we can receive their feelings with non-judgmental curiosity, they’re more inclined to come to us when something troubles them rather than lie to us or hide their pain out of fear of our reactions. And isn’t that ultimately what we want our kids to do—come to us when they’re in trouble or simply troubled by anything at all?

Lifelong habits make it hard for many parents to deliver attunement:

- “We’re more comfortable thinking our way around things rather than feeling our way through them,” writes philosopher Mark Nepo in *The Book of Awakening*. If we’re not in the habit of making room for our own painful emotions, we will have trouble making room for our children’s. And if we don’t have the vocabulary to properly label feelings, we’ll be tongue-tied trying to label theirs. “I feel bad” and “I feel good,” the meager language we commonly speak, say very little about what we’re feeling.
- We’re hooked on fixing, solving, and helping—on soothing and eradicating our children’s emotional pain. Giving their emotions room to breathe—

inviting *into the room* the pain that's already *within them*—requires us to tolerate their pain without rushing to resolve it.

- We say “don’t cry” hoping their tears will stop... so *we* can feel better. We say “cheer up” or “it’s not so bad” hoping their sadness will lift...so *we* can feel better. Without realizing it, we’re managing our own emotions in the guise of taking care of theirs. If we want our kids to learn to surrender to rather than push away their feelings, we must learn to surrender to our own.
- We’ve embraced the mistaken notion that our children’s happiness is a reflection of our competence as a parent. That’s one of the reasons we rush to restore a sad or upset or discouraged child to the preferred state of happiness—so we can feel better about ourselves as effective and loving parents.
- We’re distracted...by our thoughts, our devices, the events of our busy lives. While we’re physically present with our youngsters, we may be emotionally absent. Delivering attunement requires us to slow down, clear the deck of distractions, and take the time that’s needed to focus on their feelings. Attunement doesn’t occur when we’re moving too fast.

What happens when our kids feel distressed or vulnerable and we fail to offer attunement? What happens is they’re left alone and confused by emotions they often don’t understand. *What’s going on with me? Why do I feel this way? Am I normal or is something wrong with me?* Before they’ve developed trust in their emotions,

they easily conclude that something is indeed wrong with them. It’s a conclusion that triggers the toxic emotion of shame: *I’m inadequate, I’m defective, I’m not good enough*—the very opposite of feeling worthy. Shame is kryptonite to self-esteem, the singular emotion when triggered often enough that pushes youth toward the quick and easy feel-good options that too often turn into compulsive and addictive habits—alcohol, drugs, sex and porn, video games. *I can trust (my emotions)* is a powerful bulwark against shame.

LESS IS MORE

Must it be so complicated, child-rearing in the 21st century? Was it always so? Social historians tell us that while there’s always been a fair amount of hand wringing by moms and dads, it’s during the latter part of the 20th century that levels of parental anxiety began to go off the charts, driven in large part by social, economic, and cultural changes that left children’s futures more uncertain than ever. The parenting shelves at Barnes & Noble for decades have been bursting at the seams, reflecting parents’ confusion and desire for guidance. Few of us have faith that our kids will be all right—that their futures will be bright—unless we pour huge amounts of time, energy, and resources into the child-rearing task. The stakes seem very high, which is why so many of us—

“...act like kids’ concierge and personal handler and secretary...spending so much time nudging, cajoling, hinting, helping, haggling as the case may be, to be sure they’re not screwing up and ruining their futures,” says former Stanford Dean

of Freshmen Julie Lythcott-Haims, author of *How to Raise an Adult*. “We walk alongside them clucking praise, like a trainer at the Westminster Dog Show, coaxing them to just jump a little higher or soar a little farther, day after day after day.”

It’s exhausting for both generations, but the New Self-Esteem simplifies it. After decades of doing more, it asks us to do less. It asks us to accept our children as they are, restraining the impulse toward the time-consuming and exhausting makeover process. *I can be (who I am)*. The New Self-Esteem asks us to recognize and encourage the innate capacities in our children to do all they’re capable of doing, without getting in their way simply because we can do it faster or better, or because we can’t resist those satisfying moments of helping, fixing, and solving. *I can do (for myself)*. And the New Self-Esteem asks us to attune to our children’s emotions rather than trying to “fix” them, so they will come to believe they are okay because they know that what they’re feeling on the inside is fundamentally right and good. *I can trust (my emotions)*. Once we invest in unlearning the old paradigm and embrace instead the three pillars of the New Self-Esteem, the child-rearing project will seem a lot less complicated. Won’t that be a welcome change?

ⁱ The problems created when we devote ourselves to our children’s happiness are the central focus of my book, *I Just Want My Kids To Be Happy* (Late August Press, 2008).

ⁱⁱ The author is grateful to Dr. Shefali Tsabary for her groundbreaking book, *The Conscious Parent* (Namaste Publishing, 2010).



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Aaron Cooper, PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist at The Family Institute at Northwestern University.

He earned his doctorate from Loyola University of Chicago in 1977, following a three-year internship at the Loyola Guidance Clinic. Prior to that, he received a Master of Arts in Teaching from Northwestern University (1973) and a Bachelor of Arts (cum laude) from Harvard University (1972).

Dr. Cooper was Director of Mental Health at the Guadalupe Medical Center in Daly City, California, prior to joining the department of psychiatry at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in San Francisco, where he specialized in brief therapy with individuals and couples and taught workshops in couple communication for 18 years. For 25 years, he maintained a private practice and consulted to family agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In 2008, Dr. Cooper co-authored *I Just Want My Kids to be Happy: Why You Shouldn't Say It, Why You Shouldn't Think It, What You Should Embrace Instead*, which received highest honors in the 2008 Mom's Choice Awards and was a finalist in the 2008 Indie Excellence Awards. His thoughts about youth and family issues have been cited in over 500 newspapers, magazines and websites from coast to coast. A member of the American Psychological Association, he speaks regularly to parents and educators throughout the Chicago area.



THE FAMILY
INSTITUTE
at Northwestern University

The Family Institute at Northwestern University brings together the right partners to support children, adults, couples and families across the lifespan. As researchers, educators and therapists, we work with our clients and **PARTNER TO SEE CHANGE.**

For more information on the Family Institute visit www.family-institute.org or call 847-733-4300