



# SELF-ACCEPTANCE: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ‘ARMOUR’ THAT PROTECTS YOUNG PEOPLE

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*SELF-ACCEPTANCE* inoculates and protects young people to deal with stressful situations, such as poor achievement, negative peer comments, issues with body image, identity and other developmental challenges and difficulties. Awareness of this fact is central to the alleviation of social-emotional problems of young people as well to the promotion of high levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing.

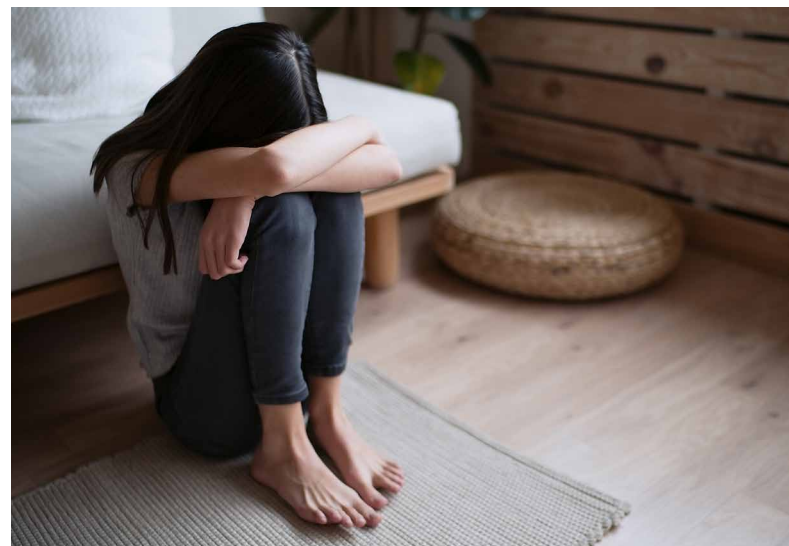
Self-acceptance in young people means they possess a realistic awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. They accept themselves despite imperfections and because of their uniqueness. They refrain from self-criticism, avoiding rating their self-worth based on other people thinking negatively of what they do, the

way they look and/or when they feel they do not live up to their own expectations.

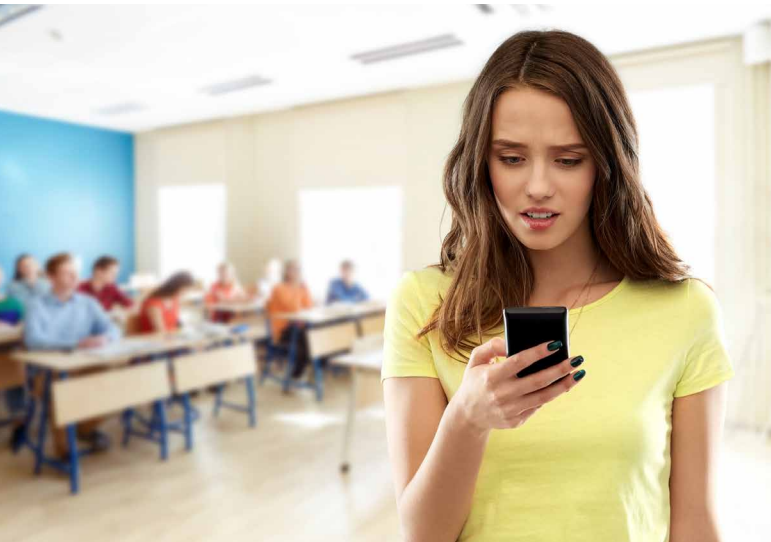
## Why self-acceptance in young people must be addressed

Chronic depression and high anxiety results from the attitude of *self-depreciation* and a lack of strong self-acceptance. Due to social and developmental factors, many young people feel badly about themselves.

To combat young people’s tendencies to self-depreciate, parents and teachers can help young people to not rate their self-worth based on their achievements, what others think of them, or their body image, but rather to display ‘self-acceptance’ – regardless of external factors.



Research shows that when young people with depression and anxiety receive cognitive, rational emotive behaviour therapies that replace the dysfunctional attitude of self-depreciation with self-acceptance, their mental health improves.



## Self-acceptance in young people – what it looks like

*Two girls receive the same cyber-message on several occasions saying that each looks FAT and UGLY. Carmen is quite devastated; feeling extremely anxious and depressed about the impact of the message on her popularity, while Alex pays little attention to the message, reminds herself that she is a worthwhile person, and returns an SMS saying that the sender should have paid more attention in their recent health class on celebrating differences and not judging people by their appearance, culture – or behaviour.*

The emotional impact of this cyber-bullying event is dramatically different for the two girls because of the different attitude or mindset of each girl. As a consequence of her attitude of *self-depreciation*, Carmen's takes being cyberbullied quite personally thinking, 'Because I am being picked on for my physical appearance, there must be something wrong with me. I now think less of myself and I must be a real loser'.

In contrast, Alex's attitude of *self-acceptance* literally protects her. She refuses to rate her self-worth and value based on another's opinion of her, instead thinking, "I accept myself no matter what" and "I am me and that's OK."

### The pressure is on kids

The research indicates that 50% of young people today say they feel very stressed compared with 30% in 2003.

Social media isn't helping, with young people constantly being shown what it means to be successful, physically attractive and cool. A myriad of mobile devices makes it that much easier to tease and bully - and get away with it. Young people feel they are constantly being judged, requiring 'likes' and other people's approval just to feel worthwhile. Our kids are doing all they can to live up to and meet their peer's expectations.

Plus, there is a ton of pressure on young people from parents and teachers, to perform well in school.

Many parents today are very anxious about their children. Consequently, many parents are over-protecting their children, with the result being that many young people feel very vulnerable and lack resilience, partly because they do not possess strong self-acceptance.



## Research facts

- 58% of young people worry excessively about what others think of them.
- 35% say that when they do badly in their schoolwork, they think “I’m a failure.”
- In primary and secondary schools, student self-acceptance is associated with positive emotions and high levels of life satisfaction.
- In primary and secondary schools, student self-depreciation is associated with negative emotions and low levels of life satisfaction.
- Student self-depreciation, anxiety & anger, are often seen alongside behaviour problems and teacher ratings of students’ low effort in school.

## Child developmental considerations

Fortunately, many very young children (3 – 6 yrs.) tend to perceive themselves in a very favourable light. However, those that experience a high incidence of negative encounters with other people and with their learning, can be heard thinking aloud: “I’m a loser,” “I’m hopeless” and “I’m a bad kid.” By the age of 8, these negative self-evaluations can become internalised, automatic and pervasive.



Children in middle to late childhood (8 – 10 yrs.) are more at risk for developing negative self-evaluations than younger children. Due to their increasing abilities to see themselves through the eyes of others as well as be concerned by the discrepancy between the way they would like to be (ideal self) and the way they really are (real self), they demonstrate great vulnerability to self-depreciation and low self-esteem.

Adolescents bring additional challenges with adolescent egocentrism emerging in 11 – 13 yr. olds. The way they view themselves may be very unrealistic. Their construction of an imaginary audience reflects the false assumption that others, particularly peers, are as preoccupied with their behavior and appearance as they are, and that peers are constantly submitting them to scrutiny and critical evaluation. While academic achievements are also important to self-evaluations, perceptions of physical appearance top the list in terms of the correlation with feelings of overall self-worth. During this stage, because of an increase in negative self-evaluations, physical development, hormones, timing of puberty, and an increase in stressful life events, depression rates rise from 2-5% to 8%.



## Implications for school culture, policy and leadership

Schools and staff need to explicitly incorporate self-acceptance throughout school culture and practice as applied to themselves, students and through parent education. This means, as a staff, taking time to become aware of what self-acceptance is and reflecting on their own degree of self-acceptance and ways it can be modelled for students. Then, as a staff, identifying opportunities to bring students on board including presenting on self-acceptance at assemblies; revealing to students that they have choices in how they think when they are faced with difficulty and challenges;

and explaining the differences between self-acceptance, self-depreciation and the emotional consequences of each. Incorporating self-acceptance in behaviour management practice and in teachable moments when students are faced with stressful situations, like tasks that are difficult or bullying incidents, is very important. And, for students receiving counselling and individual support, self-acceptance needs to be foundational.

## School SEL programs for strengthening self-acceptance in children and young people

In You Can Do It! Education, we have developed and refined lessons that teachers can use to explicitly teach self-acceptance and self-downing which appear in:



### You Can Do It! Early Childhood Program Achieve, 3rd Ed

[https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic\\_catalogue/index.php?id=6](https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic_catalogue/index.php?id=6)



### NEW Program Achieve (years 1-6; years 7-12). A social-emotional learning curriculum

[https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic\\_catalogue/index.php?id=1](https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic_catalogue/index.php?id=1)  
[https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic\\_catalogue/index.php?id=7](https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic_catalogue/index.php?id=7)

Sample titles of lessons include: *Getting Up when Feeling Down; What to Do When You are Feeling Down; Accept Myself No Matter What; Feeling Down? Don't Take Things Personally; Feeling Down. Be Proud of You*

## School-home practices for strengthening self-acceptance in children and young people

For younger children (less than 8 yrs.), the path to strong self-acceptance is paved by parents, teachers and significant others through:

- ✓ Encouraging them to make positive, realistic judgements of how smart they are, their physical abilities, how they look and behave
- ✓ Being proud of their achievements
- ✓ Providing evidence and discussion about when they learn new things that are hard, through their effort and trying new ways to do things, they become smarter and better learners
- ✓ Not judging them by their behaviour and what they have or have not accomplished
- ✓ Encouraging them to not compare their achievements with others

- ✓ When faced with difficulty and challenges, modelling self-acceptance self-talk by thinking out loud, "I am me and that's ok. I am still proud of who I am."
- ✓ Teaching self-talk that adults can rehearse with younger children when they are faced with difficulty in learning new skills or being treated badly by a peer:
  - "Just because those kids don't want me to play doesn't mean I'm a total loser"
  - "Some kids take longer than others to learn to read. I just need to keep practising and I know I'll get there."
  - "Just because they called me a loser doesn't mean it's true. I know I'm not a total loser and that's the most important thing."



As children mature, the following practices can be employed by teachers and parents to promote self-acceptance.

### **Practice 1. Introduce young people to self-acceptance**

Say that self-acceptance can help you to think and feel positive, confident and resilient when faced with tough situations like being teased or not achieving a result you hoped for. Explain the meaning of self-acceptance: "Accepting yourself as a worthwhile person no matter what - and being proud of who you are." Explain that self-downing or self-depreciation means thinking untrue, unhelpful things, such as that you are totally hopeless or a failure when you haven't been successful, someone is

behaving poorly towards you or you do not like aspects of your body image.

### **Practice 2. Communicate unconditional positive regard**

When disciplining or critiquing, do so without negative attitude or hostility. Focus on the young person's behaviour and try not to make him/her feel bad about him/herself as a person because of lack of achievement or poor behaviour.

### **Practice 3. Illustrate how self-acceptance can help a young people deal with difficulty**

If a child makes an error on an art project and begins to cry, the teacher or parent could help the child cope with the situation of making a mistake and rehearse statements such as, "We all make mistakes, but just because we made a mistake does not mean that we are bad". If a child becomes upset due to a physical impairment, rehearsing self-acceptance statements could include, "I don't like that I need hearing aids, but it doesn't make me any less awesome and it's not going to stop me from coming to school."

### **Practice 4. Challenge and change the young person's self-downing thinking**

For example, if a young person is down in the dumps, say: "One good way to think when you've had a bit of a setback is to remind yourself of your good points and not to put yourself down." Use an analogy. Ask: "Would you trash an entire car if it had just one flat tyre?" When young people can see that it would not make sense to do so, you can help them begin to see that trashing him or herself when one bad thing happens does not make sense either.

### **Practice 5. Help young people become aware of and appreciate their positive qualities**

To develop young people's sense of positive self-regard, have them take stock of their individual positive skills, strengths and personality traits, including, and aside from, school performance.

## **Practice 6. Review with young people examples of self-accepting thinking (self-talk)**

Here are examples of self-accepting self-talk that can be discussed with young people for dealing with difficult situations and events:

Happening: You get a C- in English

Self-Talk: 'Let's try and get more out of the next exam & do more practice. My value as a person is not decided by a test/exam score.'

Happening: Being excluded from a game

Self-Talk: 'I can cope with being excluded; it doesn't mean I am a loser. I am who I am, I'm still proud of whom I am. I don't need to be included in a game to feel good about myself, to be a worthwhile people.'

## **Summary: Communicate the psychological armour that protects**

*Teach children to never rate themselves in terms of their behaviour and to separate judgments of their actions from judgments of self-worth. Encourage them to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their traits and behaviours –both good and bad- without evaluating themselves as good or bad. Help combat children's tendencies towards self-downing by reminding them they are made up of many good qualities (and some that are not so good) and that they do not lose their good qualities when bad things happen. Explain to children that all human beings are capable and likeable in their unique ways and, therefore, it is good for children to accept themselves unconditionally.*

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