Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance in children and young people means they possess a realistic awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and they accept themselves despite imperfections and because of their uniqueness.

What's self-acceptance?

Self-acceptance for children and young people means they acknowledge they're a complex, imperfect human capable of making mistakes as well as significant accomplishments.

When faced with strong criticism, lack of success or negative perceptions, a child or young person who demonstrates self-acceptance is more likely to choose to think, "I accept myself no matter what".

Self-acceptance can help children and young people deal with stressful situations, such as poor achievement, negative peer comments, issues with body image, identity, and other developmental challenges and difficulties. Self-acceptance is not an excuse for an individual to accept their bad or inappropriate behaviour –rather, with strong self-acceptance, it's much easier for a child or young person to realistically evaluate what they do and to work on changing behaviour that's inappropriate or self-defeating.

Keys to strengthening self-acceptance

It's important for children and young people to recognise that they are not their behaviour and, similarly, to distinguish between being 'a failure' and struggling with a task.

Children and young people should ideally be aware of and value their positive characteristics, skills and character strengths in all areas of life including work and family relationships. If children and young people are able to value these strengths, then, when faced with difficulty or negativity, they are better able to remind themselves why they're proud of who they are.

Children and young people can generate and practise using self-accepting self-talk when confronted with criticism, imperfect performance, negative self-perceptions of body image, or other events they experience as troubling.

- Examples of self-accepting self-talk include:
- "I accept myself no matter what"

- "I prefer people to like me, but I can live without their approval"

- "Mistakes and setbacks are inevitable. I will accept myself while disliking my mistakes and setbacks."

- "My performance – perfect or otherwise – doesn't determine my worth as a person."

- "I accept who I am, even though I may not like some of my traits and behaviours."

Educators and self-acceptance

As an educator, you're in a good position to promote self-acceptance among those in your care.

Try to:

- take time to become aware of what self-acceptance is and reflecting on your own degree of self-acceptance and ways it can be modelled for children and young people

- identify opportunities to bring children and young people on board (for instance, asking students to present on self-acceptance)

- reveal to children and young people that they have choices in how they think when they're faced with difficulty and challenges

- explain the differences between self-acceptance, self-depreciation and the emotional consequences of each.

Promote self-acceptance in children and young people

For younger children (under 8 years), you can promote strong self-acceptance through:

- encouraging them to make positive, realistic judgments 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 approaches, 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

- modelling self-acceptance self-talk, when faced with difficulty and challenges, by thinking out loud, "I'm me and that's OK – I'm still proud of who I am."

- rehearsing self-talk when they're faced with difficulty in learning new skills or being treated badly by someone else (for example, "Some kids take longer than others to learn to read – I just need to keep practising and I know I'll get there.")

For older children and adolescents, the following approaches can be adopted to promote self-acceptance:

- introduce children and young people to the concept of self-acceptance – explain that it can help them think and feel positive, confident and resilient when faced with tough situations (for example, if a student is sad after being teased or not achieving a result they'd hoped for, you might help them cope with the situation by rehearsing self-acceptance statements.

- communicate with unconditional positivity – when disciplining or critiquing, do so without negative attitude or hostility. Focus on the child or young person's behaviour and try not to make them feel bad about themselves as a person due to lack of achievement or poor behaviour.

- help children and young people become aware of and appreciate their positive qualities – have them take stock of their individual positive skills, strengths and personality traits, including, and aside from, school performance. If a student seems down in the dumps, you might 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."

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