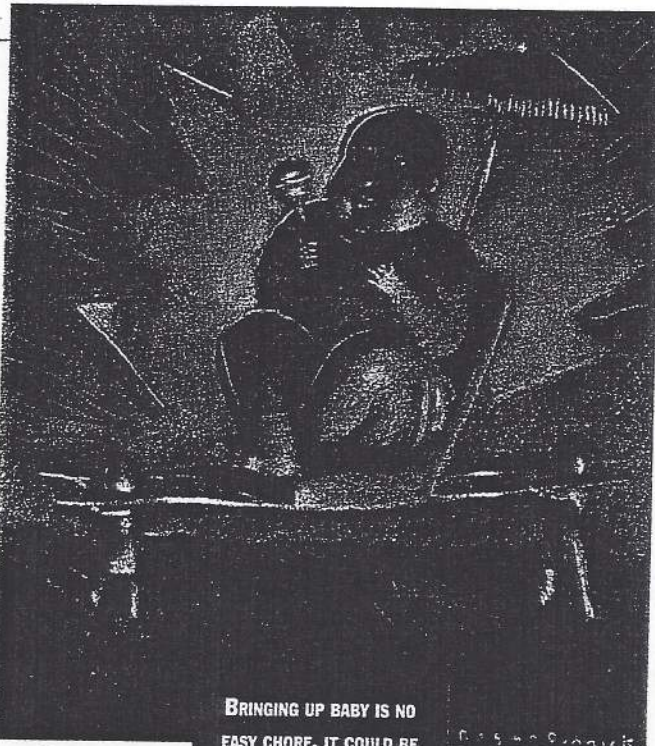


THE THREE R'S OF SELF-ESTEEM

In our endless efforts to help our children build self-esteem, perhaps we are actually hindering them. One psychologist suggests that it's time to get back to basics, and he offers some old-fashioned golden rules to follow.

For countless generations prior to World War II, whenever young parents experienced difficulties in the rearing of children, they took themselves not to therapists of one sort or another, but to grandparents or other respected elders within their extended families. These people—the child rearing experts of bygone days—gave counsel based on lives they had led. Their advice was concrete, practical, and rooted in the soil of common sense. Central to this was the idea that parents were to make sure children developed *respect* for others, especially those in positions of legitimate authority; a willingness to accept *responsibility* for both their social behavior and tasks assigned to them by authority figures; and a *resourceful* attitude toward the challenges of life. These Three R's were seen as necessary to both a solid value system and good citizenship.

After World War II, the extended family in America changed. It began breaking into highly mobile units that were called nuclear families. As distance between family members grew, many young parents began turning to psychologists and other helping professionals for the child-rearing guidance they'd once received from extended family members. The problem was that, by and large, the advice dispensed by professionals was based not on lives they had led, but rather on books they had read. This advice, therefore, while intellectually appealing, was all but devoid of common sense.



BRINGING UP BABY IS NO EASY CHORE. IT COULD BE THAT PARENTS NEED TO STOP CARRYING THE FULL LOAD OF RESPONSIBILITY AND START LETTING CHILDREN STAND ON THEIR OWN FEET AND DISCOVER A TRUE SENSE OF SELF-WORTH AND SELF-RESPECT.

The well-intentioned members of this professional community decided that the child-rearing tradition in America was broken and needed fixing. They presented themselves, furthermore, as the chosen mechanics. By the early '70s, these new child-rearing "experts" had succeeded in convincing America's parents that installing something called self-esteem in children—making their children "feel good about themselves"—was their ultimate responsibility. Supposedly, this was accomplished by heaping attention and praise upon children.

The more attention parents paid to children, the more "warm fuzzies" they heaped, and the more emotionally healthy children became, or so said the "experts," a good number of whom had no children themselves.

As the self-esteem paradigm took hold in our culture, everything about the rearing of children, and therefore everything about life in the American family, began to change. Previous generations, for instance, recognized that children were responsible participants in their own upbringing. Parents were responsible to a conservative point, after which children were held completely accountable for their behavior and school performance. Parents were to take interest in what their children were doing, but not get involved unless absolutely necessary. In this way, children were helped toward standing on their own two feet.

The self-esteem theory devalued the child's responsibility and established a new standard of excellence in parenting.

Those parents who paid their children the most attention, doled out the most praise, and spent the most "quality" time with them were supposedly the best parents.

The experts then began referring to someone they called the primary care giver. However vague, this clearly pointed to the female parent. By implication, therefore, mothers were primarily responsible for seeing to the installation of self-esteem. Capping things off, the experts said that children who misbehaved, performed poorly in school, had difficulty getting along with peers, or were shy were suffering from "low self-esteem." In other words, where there was a child with a problem, there was a mother who was not paying that child sufficient attention. This tangled web of ideas is at the root of the anxiety and guilt that women of this generation often bring to the task of child rearing. Haunted by fears of inadequacy, the responsible mother is often driven to a level of involvement with her children that prolongs their dependency and interferes with the children learning to stand on their own two feet. This state of affairs exists largely because we believed that people who went to graduate school knew more about raising children than did grandma.


As I travel the country talking to various parent and professional groups, I seek out teachers who've been teaching for 30 years or more. These individuals have seen two generations of children pass before their eyes. I ask them how they would compare children of 30 years ago with children of today. Their words, of course, are different, but their answers are always the same. Today's children, these teachers tell me, are lacking in respect, responsibility, and resourcefulness. As a veteran North Carolina teacher recently told me, "Today's child is self-absorbed, often does no more than it takes to just get by, and gives up almost immediately if a problem even looks hard." In other words, we abandoned the Three R's of child rearing to our peril.

Back to Basics

True self-esteem develops as a child discovers that despite frustration, failure, fear, and other adversity he is capable of solving problems on his own and can stand successfully on his own two feet. Parents can, and should, provide the opportunity, support, and guidance the child needs to make this discovery, but they cannot guarantee the discovery itself. Thomas Jefferson said pretty much the same thing when he said we have a right to the pursuit of happiness, but that the outcome of the pursuit is a matter of individual responsibility. Along those lines, many parents fail to realize that by trying to make their children happy they end up with children who cannot make themselves happy; by protecting their children from any and all frustration, they end up with children who cannot tolerate frustration; by solving problems for children that they can solve for themselves (albeit with struggle), they end up with children who give up quickly when the going gets tough. In short, you do not help children learn to stand on their own feet by letting them stand on yours.

Assisting children toward the discovery of true self-esteem requires that parents create family environments that communicate the Three R's of respect, responsibility, and resource-

fulness. In the family, parents, not children, should command center stage. Children should have a daily routine of chores for which they are not paid, they should do their own homework, find the majority of their own after-school recreation, and should not be allowed to waste great amounts of time in front of television sets and video games. A child who is respectful of others will conduct himself with a sensitive regard for other human beings. A child who is responsible will do his best, regardless of the task or the situation. A child who is resourceful will try and try again until success is at hand. Out of these strengths gradually emerges a genuine sense of self-worth and self-respect. In other words, a child who possesses the Three R's has been prepared as well as possible to stand on his own two feet and discover that which brings true satisfaction to his or her life.

Is that old-fashioned? Absolutely, as in tried-and-true. 

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He invites readers to send questions or comments concerning family relationships to HEMISPHERES, 1301 Carolina Street, Greensboro, NC 27401. He will address those matters in a future column.