

Building "Self"

by Lloyd Robertson

I was asked, recently, to do a presentation at Kikinahk on either healthy family relationships or self-esteem. "Why not do both at once?", I asked. I then explained to the startled conference organizer that healthy relationships and self-esteem go together better than love and marriage - you can't have one without the other.

What is this "self" found in "self-esteem"? British psychologist Susan Blackmore declared the "self" to be an illusion. The "self" is all those things we believe to be true about who we are. This collection of beliefs, called memes, form an interlocking shell that supports each other. New information, if it does not fit with the existing shell, bounces off thru a variety of psychological mechanisms.

For example, supposing one of my core beliefs is that I am stupid. The other memes in my "self shell" support the idea that I am stupid. Now, suppose I "ace" an exam. Probably the exam was easy, or the instructor is trying to "set me up", or he gave me a good mark because my uncle is the Chief, or maybe he went out on a drunk and was too hung over to really mark the exams. If all else fails I will simply repress or forget that I ever got that good mark and choose to remember, instead, all the bad marks I have received. Thus, my self belief, that I am a poor learner, is preserved.

Sometimes it feels as tho there is a little person inside that shell pulling the strings that make us go. That is the illusion Dr. Blackmore was talking about. As long as we have that illusion it is very difficult for us to change our "self".

From where does this "self" come? A newborn baby has no "self". He is literally one with the universe. Over time he learns, often thru painful experience, that there is part of the universe that is not part of him. He learns that there is a "me" and a "not me". He begins to feel small and dependant. And if he is not part of a loving, nurturing family this "self" that is left over from the "not me" becomes largely negative.

Each family has it's own culture. Immediately, at birth, the newborn infant begins absorbing that culture. The infant learns it's place including whether or not he will be shy, rebellious, brave, helpless, intelligent or a host of other memes that make up his "self". Once the child develops a self he will fight very hard to keep it; or, more correctly, the existing self fights to keep itself from being replaced by something better.

Parents can help their children develop healthy selves by showing them, thru their daily actions, that they are loved, worthy and valued. Take your child's joys and hurts seriously. Keep promises. Say "I love you" often and show it thru your actions.

We show respect by discussing things that happen calmly, reaching agreements and, sometimes, compromising. Avoid yelling. Actively seek out the opinions of your children and take those opinions seriously. That does not mean that the child sets the rules. It does mean; however, that if we overrule our child, the child knows that there are good reasons for doing so.

Children also need to be raised in a secure environment free from both abuse and superstitious fears. They need to know that they are safe and that they can do things to protect their own safety. They need to learn that they can succeed by doing socially useful things starting with the family. This means that each child needs to have a positive role for themselves within each family.

Finally, teach self-discipline by allowing your children to experience the logical consequences of their actions. We must not cover up for them nor do we impose harsh punishments.

The key word in building healthy family relationships is "respect". If we respect ourselves we will know our own boundaries, limits and needs and we will communicate these to those around us. If we respect our children we will make ourselves aware of our children's boundaries, limits and needs and we will take that into account in all that we do. The result is both healthy family relationships and positive self-esteem.