

## Kids and Self-Esteem: How to Help Them Grow a Thicker Skin by Darah Zeledon from [www.empoweringparents.com](http://www.empoweringparents.com)

It starts so young these days - much earlier than I remember. Our kids come home fragile and in tears, basing their happiness on these fickle, yet pivotal interactions. I see it more with my girls. (My boys are perhaps still too immature to care, although I believe boys and girls are wired differently.)

It's inescapable and part of the process of maturation. Private schools, religious schools, charter schools, A-rated, B-rated - it's all the same. Kids are kids. Many root their self-esteem in how they measure up against their peers. And deep insecurity, or rather, underdeveloped self-confidence compels them to berate one another to bolster their own social status.

It's heart-wrenching for us parents who have to witness this from the sidelines. Yet the more we fight our children's battles and try to intervene, the more we hamper the growth of their self-esteem and independence, in the long run. The answer? We must learn how to refrain, unless it's a matter of safety or health.

I remember going through this myself. It was a living nightmare and at age 10, I went from a straight-A student to barely passing from one semester to the next. One day my mother came to school, marching right into the cafeteria during lunchtime, and attempted to take on the entire clique of mean girls. My face turned crimson and hot as she angrily accused them all, one by one, of ganging up on her daughter. I was mortified.

In fact, after that incident, it got so bad that my parents accompanied me one night to the private home of the County Superintendent. They begged him to allow me to attend another school, one out of our designated district. We were denied. I wanted to disappear.

It was the best thing that could have ever happened. Yet, I didn't know it at the time. I was forced to adapt, to mature.

To survive socially, I implemented new strategies. I proactively sought out the "other" kids - the quieter, loyal and less-popular bunch. They embraced me wholeheartedly and didn't ask many questions. These girls became my true friends and I learned invaluable lessons that I try to impart upon my kids today.

Each night before bed, I coax my girls into venting about all the stressful interactions that ultimately define whether their day was a success or a failure. I persuade them to articulate their feelings. Much of their frustrations are locked away and only once home, and feeling safe, can they release it all. Sometimes they write it down. Regardless, I listen and nod my head. Once they finish regurgitating all the painful memories, I put on my "motivational speaker hat" and give them a serious pep talk. Night after night. And each morning I do it again as they leave for school.

Yes, I want them to be kind and recognize the emotional damage caused by vicious gossip. Moreover, I want them to develop rock-solid self-esteem that enables them to see through the insults - right into the heart of the frightened, insecure child that utters them.

"Perhaps this kid's parents don't love them enough," I reason, "Or encourage them enough, or believe in them."

I want my kids to feel compassion for the mean kids. Because then, they'll grow impermeable to such hurtful attacks; they'll remain stoic and unfrazzled.

Because it doesn't end when the bell rings or at graduation. Unfortunately. That's why I want them to be TOUGH.

"You are a leader. You are a winner. Put up that invisible wall and be courteous, but keep the conversation light. Don't allow their words to penetrate your heart."

"Trust me," I assure them. "Many of today's so-called popular, bad-mouthing kids will have a hard time in life later on. The good-natured children, the ones that stay neutral and loyal, will become your future community leaders."

With a combination of love, straight-talk, and role-playing, they get it.

And, as their mom, I endeavor to model positive behavior coupled with a strong character.

For parents, our workshop is our home and that is where we must support, coach and train our kids. And because kids learn what they see in the home, I know their chances of evolving into mindful, self-confident adults are that much greater.

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Your elementary counseling team would also like to share that about 75-80% of our conversations need to be positive in nature with our children. While we want our children to share those difficult stories with us, we don't want our children to feel that they will only get our undivided attention from sharing problems. During those heartfelt conversations, it is also important to not allow our children to stay stuck in the problem. We should be talking about ways to solve the problem. That's where self-esteem comes from is solving some of life's problems. You can reference the elementary counseling program called, "Kelso's Choices" to help your child solve conflicts.