



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

A Parent Guide for Middle School Years, PART 1 THE SOCIAL 'TWEEN

How we perceive ourselves affects how we relate to others. Our self-concept and our social self go hand-in-hand. However, contrary to media-messages, self-esteem does not evolve because of body shape, clothing, athletic prowess, awards, power, prestige, or possessions. Like happiness, authentic self-esteem follows our choices and behaviors. When we act or choose not to act, and then we evaluate our practice, if we respect the decision or experience well-being, pleasure, peacefulness or satisfaction about that decision, we foster positive self-esteem. In the reverse, if we experience disappointment, emptiness or destructiveness when we examine the actions or the inaction of our day, we add kindling wood to the fire of negative self-esteem. Self-esteem begins with a sustained experience of unconditional love and then evolves through repeated experiences of security, autonomy, initiative, and industry.

Psychologist Erik Erikson explained that each stage of psycho-social development involves a battle between two conflicting forces. A pattern of experiencing one force promotes positive self-esteem. A pattern of the opposite force damages self-esteem. For instance, the initial stage involves trust versus mistrust. No one can provide or experience trust on a 24/7 basis but if the pattern of experience is one where a child trusts and things evolved as expected and advertised, then security is strengthened and that leads to self-confidence. If, on the other hand, a child trusts but then is denied or frustrated or disappointed in the way things evolved, that child learns to mistrust. A pattern of disappointment or broken promises leads to a sense of insecurity. Note, please, that mistrust is not a bad thing. We all need a sense of mistrust in order to be safe. It is a pattern of mistrust that becomes problematic.

PRE-'TWEEN DEVELOPMENT

Prior to middle school, 'tweens passed through three stages of social development. Stage one involved the issue of **trust versus mistrust**, the major psycho-social life task between birth and age two. Its positive resolution develops security or self-confidence. Stage two, **autonomy/self-control versus shame/doubt/compulsion** was the major task of the "terrible two's" and the psycho-social focus from 18 months through age three. Its positive resolution develops responsibility and self-control. Stage three, the psychological conflict of preschoolers (ages 3-4-5), involved **initiative versus guilt/inhibition**. The positive resolution of stage three produces a sense of initiative and self-respect flows from it. The very good news is that it is never too late to make a difference! At every age and every stage we need to foster these three elements of self-esteem. A middle school 'tween is capable of being taught to understand the elements and to make choices that increase security, autonomy, and initiative.

'TWEEN COMPETENCE

Stage four, the development of industry, is the major psycho-social task of the elementary school years (ages 6-12) and, therefore, the necessary focus for middle school 'tweens (ages 11-13). The crisis at this point involves **industry versus inferiority**. Industry is the capacity to be persistent and diligent, to follow-through on a task, and to create a systematic approach for problem-solving and accomplishing responsibilities. Industry creates a positive energy within the child whereas inferiority invites inertia, an inability or unwillingness to act. The positive resolution of stage four develops a sense of method within the child and the ego-quality of competence. Parents and teachers who contribute to a child's growth in industry starve off the tendency to inferiority. Generally, middle

school 'tweens enjoy projects and group experiences. Both are social in nature and their success requires stick-to-it-tive-ness.

PROACTIVE PARENT PRACTICES THAT DEVELOP INDUSTRY

- Provide repeated, systematic instruction in the world of tools, i.e., house appliances, screwdriver, wrench, pliers, rake, lawnmower . . .
- Teach skills like cooking, cleaning, ironing, laundry care, sewing buttons and snaps. . .
- Foster reading skills, summarizing skills, and study skills. . .
- Engage 'tweens in tasks that require steady care over time, being productive and accomplishing, i.e., watering plants, pet care, weekly service project, a paper route . . .
- Cultivate deadlines, time management, and organizational skills.
- Create long-range projects with periodic check-in points.
- Work side-by-side on a difficult task. Refrain from doing the work for the 'tween.
- Model and teach how to set a goal, to name specific parts/objectives related to the goal and how to determine a reasonable timeline and periodic means of evaluation. Restructure when necessary.
- Adopt the motto: “Plan your work and work your plan” and/or “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

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