

# RESEARCH

# FACTS and FINDINGS

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## Adolescent Self-Esteem

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Is adolescence a time of decreased self-esteem? Many teens, their teachers, their parents, and others think so, and many adults recall adolescence as a time of increasingly heightened self-scrutiny and greatly fluctuating self-esteem. But the answer is not entirely clear, as self-esteem is a subjective state, and therefore very hard to measure. Self-esteem refers to how much a person likes (esteems) herself or himself. Some behaviors strongly suggest high or low self-esteem; for example, a person with high self-esteem is unlikely to attempt suicide. However, some people whose talents and achievements appear to give them every reason to like themselves do not. Adolescents have varying levels of self-esteem, which appears to be influenced by such factors as gender, ethnicity, and social class. It can also vary *within* an individual—an adolescent may have different levels of self-esteem in different domains such as social, scholastics, athletics, appearance, and general conduct and actions.

*Research has found that satisfaction with physical appearance is a large component of self-esteem, and adolescent girls have greater dissatisfaction with physical appearance than do boys (Harter, 1990, 1999).*

Studies have found that one-third to one-half of adolescents struggle with low self-esteem, especially in early adolescence (Harter, 1990; Hirsch & DuBois, 1991). The results of low self-esteem can be temporary, but in serious cases can lead to various problems including depression, anorexia nervosa, delinquency, self-inflicted injuries and even suicide. Self-esteem is related to school performance and delinquency. Adolescents with low self-esteem are more likely to do poorly in school, to become pregnant, or to impregnate a partner. But it is important to keep in mind that the causal direction is unclear; that is, researchers are not sure if having low self-esteem *causes* youth to engage in problem behaviors or the other way around. Gang members, for example, report higher than average self-esteem.

While adolescents' self-esteem can fluctuate, from approximately eighth grade on, studies have found that self-esteem appears relatively stable. Individuals with high self-esteem in childhood are likely to be adolescents with high self-esteem. Many studies have demonstrated that during middle and late adolescence, and into early adulthood, self-esteem stabilizes or even increases (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983; Harter, 1990). The safest generalization to make regarding adolescents and self-esteem is that some but not all adolescents experience low self-esteem, and that for some but not all who experience it low self-esteem is associated with serious problems.

*Gender and self-esteem* Studies in a wide range of western countries have determined that adolescent females, on average, have a lower sense of self-esteem than adolescent males (Baumeister, 1993; Pipher, 1994). For Americans, adolescence brings a dramatically increased emphasis on physical attractiveness for young women, many of whom feel they are lacking. Boys self-esteem can be affected by contradictory societal messages— on the one hand to appear to be strong and on the other to be emotionally expressive (Pollack, 1998).

*Ethnicity, social class, and self-esteem* In general, middle-class and upper-class adolescents have higher self-esteem than less affluent adolescents. This discrepancy increases into older adolescence. One common explanation is simply that higher socio-economic status youth have greater resources. For example, higher socio-economic status students generally attend higher quality schools, and/or perform better in school. Also, if higher socio-economic status youth have individual difficulties or special needs in school, their parents more often have the resources to assist. So, resources can both augment individual skills and alleviate difficulties that would otherwise reduce self-esteem.

Researchers have only recently begun to systematically study the relationship between ethnicity and adolescent self-esteem. Much of this research has focused on African-American adolescents. Although initial studies suggested that African-American children had low self-esteem, current research suggests that the self-esteem of African-American adolescents is comparable to if not greater than that of ethnic majority peers (Harter, 1990). For instance, white girls currently appear most vulnerable to a drop in self-esteem in adolescence, as compared to any other group (Harter, 1999). Studies of African-American girls indicate that they are not generally subjected to the same vulnerabilities because they do not experience the same decline in body image as their white female peers. In other words, despite encounters with racism and prejudice, many African-Americans do not experience a drop in self-esteem in adolescence.

*Increasing adolescents' self-esteem* Programs designed in the 1960's to boost adolescents' self-esteem were primarily focused on making individuals feel good about themselves in general. In contrast, current programs focus on specific aspects of self-esteem. For those concerned with increasing adolescent self-esteem, which appears possible to do, the sug-

gestions below have been supported by recent research. However, no one should work at raising adolescents' self-esteem for the purpose of reducing problem behavior. This has not proved to be an effective strategy.

- Identify the core factors that cause low self-esteem and simultaneously identify the domains of competence that are important to the adolescent.
- Focus on sources of emotional support and social approval that exist in the adolescent's world.
- Increase self-esteem through emphasizing achievement of specific skills and goals, and by encouraging initiative.
- Support coping with difficult situations and trying to overcome them, rather than avoiding them (Harter, 1990, 1999; Larson, 2000).

*The main point to remember about increasing self-esteem is that telling someone to have high self-esteem will not do it. Adolescents will feel better about themselves if they experience success in domains they care about and are praised for that success by people they respect. Relationships with parents and relationships with peers are two important sources of social support that contribute to adolescents' self-esteem (Harter, 1990; Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983). Another approach is to heighten adolescents' appreciation of domains in which they are successful, reducing the impact of disappointment in other domains.*

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