

Building Self-Esteem in Our Children and Ourselves

BRAD WILCOX

Brad Wilcox currently is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brigham Young University and has a PhD from the University of Wyoming. This address was given, October 3, 2002 at the BYU Families Under Fire Conference

© 2003 by Brigham Young University
Division of Continuing Education.
All rights reserved.

For further information write:

BYU Families Under Fire,
136 Harman Continuing Education Building,
Provo, Utah 84602.
(801) 422-3559

E-mail: conferences@byu.edu

Home page: <http://ce.byu.edu/cw/fuf>

Welcome to a wonderful conference that will address some of the most dangerous problems facing our families today. Workshops will address issues such as depression, rebellious youth, pornography, domestic abuse, and even suicide. As serious as such problems are, they are usually symptoms of deeper problems. Unless we deal with the deeper needs that drive people to depression, rebellion, etc., our efforts to help will only be of temporary assistance. Most observable negative behaviors are usually strategies people use to deal with deeper problems. Vandalism, theft, running away, bad friends, pornography, and dysfunctional homes are often “leaf” problems stemming from “root” problems that must be addressed if long-term change is going to take place. What are the “root” problems? Obviously the list would vary from person to person and circumstance to circumstance. However, I have found that low self-esteem, poor communication skills, inability to cope with stress and pressure, and weak spirituality are often major underlying factors causing the problems we will be addressing in this conference. While whole conferences could be devoted to each of those factors I have been asked to address only one today and that is self-esteem. One teenager writes:

I feel so inadequate, so inferior, so average. I watch and study everyone around me—people, pictures in magazines, actresses, everyone—picking out every feature that I wish I could have for myself. In every person I see a trait that I rip myself apart for not having or for not being able to do as well. Jealousy has made me a depressed and hopeless person . . . I am overweight . . . My hair's a mess . . . My eyebrows are each different . . . My eyelashes grow every direction . . . My nose is long, even my mother would admit, because she has the same one, only

not quite as bad.

What is self-esteem? Perhaps I can best answer by sharing an experience that happened when Sister Barbara Barrington Jones and I were speaking at a youth conference. “Sing us a song,” the young people were calling to a girl in their group. The young people were putting on a spur-of-the-moment talent show as they waited for the dance to begin. Some young women sang, and a few young men told jokes and did impersonations. Now they were prodding a certain young woman to sing. “Come on, you have a great voice,” they coaxed. “Sing the song we learned at camp.”

We could see the young sister's embarrassment. Everyone began to feel uncomfortable in the awkwardness of the moment. I quickly got some big tough guys to stand up and sing, “I Hope They Call Me on a Mission” and “Popcorn Popping on the Apricot Tree” complete with actions. The entire group was laughing and involved. No one noticed Barbara as she sought out the embarrassed girl to make sure she was okay. Barbara asked, “Is everything all right?”

“I hate it when my friends do that.”

“They were just trying to make you feel good.”

“I'm a horrible singer. If I got up there I would totally bomb,” the girl said angrily. Barbara didn't say anything more. She simply listened as the girl's feelings came gushing out. “I can't do anything right. I'm ugly and fat and I'm the dumbest person in my school.”

Just then some of the stake leaders called to Barbara and the girl, “Come on over. We're taking some pictures.”

The girl began to leave the room. Barbara said, “Don't go. Come stand by me. I would love to have a picture with you.”

“No one wants a picture of me,” she snapped. “I wish cameras had never been invented. I hate pictures.” She hurried away from the group. As Barbara watched her leave, she sensed her real message, and it had very little to do with hating cameras.

Self-esteem is the mental picture we have of ourselves—the value we place on ourselves. Basically, it is how friendly we feel toward ourselves. The pictures that caused this girl's frustration are not the ones taken with cameras. Rather, they are the ones she has developed in her own mind. Unfortunately, right then her self-esteem pictures were out of focus, fuzzy and cloudy. Heavenly Father would rather have us focus on the positive. We must see clear pictures of ourselves—our true beauty, greatness and eternal potential. Nevertheless, many young people struggle to maintain a high and positive self-esteem. Many adults do as well. Few would argue that if we have healthy attitudes about ourselves, it is much easier to overcome problems. When we feel sure of ourselves, we are better able to stand up to the pressures of life. We do better in school, at church, in our jobs, and in all aspects of our lives.

As much as we would always like to feel that way, there are times in our lives and the lives of our children when low self-esteem seems to paralyze us and keeps them from doing the positive

things that would give us the very confidence we lack. Young people are especially vulnerable. They feel unsure and negative. They attempt to mask their insecurities by withdrawing or becoming egotistical braggarts or even violent bullies. Still, their insecurities are usually obvious. Research confirms that low self-esteem is related to poor mental health, poor academic achievement, and delinquency (Harter, S. *Psychological Perspectives of the Self*, vol. 3, pp.137–181, 1983).

Dr. Larry Dietz, a psychiatrist who has spent many years studying self-esteem in adolescents, has identified important sources of self-esteem:

Perceived social acceptance
Perceived performance
Ability to open up to others and discuss feelings
Comparison with others and “ideals”
Physical well-being and appearance

If we are honest with ourselves, when we feel low self-esteem it is usually because of one of these reasons. We think no one likes us or we haven't done the best job we could. We refuse to tell others what's really bothering us, or we feel discouraged because we don't measure up to others—especially those perfect people in the magazines. Perhaps we have been too busy to eat in a healthy way or exercise and we know we don't look our best.

Which source matters the most? Is it appearance or physical well-being? Is it performance or social acceptance? What is the source of self-esteem that matters most to our children? It's difficult to pinpoint just one because usually children draw from a combination of all of these main sources along with others unique to each individual. However, these sources offer a basic framework on which we can build.

As important as it is to understanding where self-esteem comes from and the reasons why children may or may not feel good about themselves, let's focus our attention now on what we can do about it. How can we build self-esteem in our children and ourselves?

Here are some suggestions that can be easily remembered by thinking about the letters of the word P-A-R-E-N-T-S.

P stands for Praise.

My parents support me 100 percent. They are always there. As we grew up, my brothers and I did sports. My mom went to every one of our games. Mom and dad are always there cheering us on and telling us how great we are when we get down.

I wish my mom and dad would praise me more. I hear “you can do better” a lot more than I hear “that's really good.” I hear a lot more negatives than positives

and I think it should be the other way around.

Terrance D. Olson and R. Lanier Britsch wrote, "One reason children feel inadequate is that their adequacy has never been acknowledged by the adults in their lives" (*Counseling: A Guide to Helping Others*. Deseret Book, 1983, p.76). Praise feeds the spirit just as food feeds the body. You know how much food teenagers' growing bodies can take in. How much food are we offering their growing spirits? A national PTA study on self-esteem reports, "Parents generous with kind words help their children keep a guard up against narcotics addiction and teenage pregnancy" (*Daily Universe*, Wed, March 28, 1984, p.13).

One mother found that when complimenting her daughter, it helped not only to be specific but also to look for distinctive and creative ways of expressing her feelings. For instance, once she left a note and candy bar on her daughter's bed. Another time, she took out a personal ad in the local paper: "To Jessica—You brighten my day. Love, Mom."

One effective form of praise I try to use often is to find positive nicknames for the youth I work with. A boy named Dan will become "Dan the man." Ben is called, "Big Ben." Ray is called, "The King," and Linda is "Pretty" because that is what the words mean in Spanish. I call teenagers my Helaman's Warriors or his three Nephites. In some cases, positive nicknames can be a sign of acceptance and make young people feel approved of and important. One boy said, "I know the one thing my dad does that really helps me is that he finds uplifting nicknames for me. Like when I play football, he always calls me 'Mr. Touchdown' and things like that."

Some think that liberal amounts of praise will make a teenager arrogant and conceited. On the contrary, it will build confidence and security. There are enough influences outside Church and home pointing out faults. Young people don't need parents and leaders to "keep them humble." One bishop, after trying to compliment one of his struggling young women during a youth fireside, received what he thought to be a verbal slap in the face. He had said, "You look nice tonight."

The girl responded, "No, I don't. You're only saying that because you're the bishop." When he later told us of this experience, we reminded him that young people who do not feel good about themselves usually do not know how to receive compliments well. We encouraged him to see through built-up defenses and remember that, sometimes, when people are starving, they initially reject the food they so badly need. We also suggested that, in the future, the bishop try complimenting this particular girl in private—in an interview or with a phone call. With teenagers, public praise is sometimes rejected because of the potential negative social stigma attached to being recognized before a group. One young man put it this way, "I'm proud of getting straight A's in school, but I don't want anyone to announce my grades over the loud speaker system because then the other guys start bugging me and calling me 'the brain.'"

Our friend Randy Bird had a young man in his seminary class who, every time Brother Bird marked reading charts, would say that he hadn't read further than 1 Nephi in the Book of Mormon. This young man was a state champion wrestler and was very popular with his peers. At the close of the year, he came up to Brother Bird and said, "I just thought you'd like to know that I've finished the Book of Mormon."

Brother Bird picked himself up off the floor and asked, “Why didn't you tell me sooner?” The young man responded, “I didn't want people to think I was spiritual” (*High Fives and High Hopes*, Deseret 1990, pp.20–21).

Negative comments seem to come so easily: “You move like a turtle, “ “How many times must I tell you that you just don't look good in that outfit?” Sometimes we pretend we are joking by quickly adding, “just kidding” after a clever low-cut. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Words are as hard as cannon balls.” Young people feel those cannon balls when we casually or thoughtlessly say, “You're so stupid. You really give me gray hairs” or “I just never can count on you. I knew I'd end up doing your work.” We must be careful. As sure as with Johnny Lingo's eight-cow wife, people will respond to what is said to and about them.

An article in *Childhood Education* reported that 25 percent of all teachers in their study NEVER praised. Of the 75 percent who did offer praise, half offered only bland, unenthusiastic, ineffectual acceptance with comments such as “Okay” or “uh-huh” (Elizabeth McAllister, “Anatomy of a Crushed Spirit.” Summer, 1990, p.203). On the other hand, think of how often and consistently scriptures record that Heavenly Father praised Jesus, saying, “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; 2 Peter 1:17; 3 Nephi 11:7; D&C 45:4).

.Mother Theresa said, “Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless” (*Church News*, Oct. 24, 1992, p.2). My wife, Debi, has never forgotten an occasion in her teenage years when someone told her that in a meeting a leader had praised her because she was dependable. The leader never even said the words straight to Debi, but they got back to her and made a real difference in her self-esteem.

A young man named Matthew from O'Fallon, Illinois, said, “I love it when parents and leaders praise me for the things I have accomplished, big or small. Some people think you outgrow the need for that but I don't think anyone ever outgrows the need to be praised.”

A Stands for Accept: “I wish they could more readily accept who I am instead of who they want me to be. They should encourage me in the activities I enjoy instead of always demanding that I do the things they want.”

Teen years are a wonderful testing ground. This is obvious in everything from music and dress to the types of extra-curricular activities young people select. As long as Church standards are not compromised, parents and leaders should be accepting of choices teenagers make. We need to let them express their opinions and feelings freely. One mother said, “My husband and I were not too happy when our son decided to get so heavily involved in sports in high school. We know that, in the long run, he would be better off putting his efforts toward getting better grades and preparing for college. But, we listened to his point of view and accepted his decision.”

Young people must never feel that adults accept them only when they do things our way. They must feel they are accepted for who they are. Young people are always of worth regardless of whether or not we think their present choices and actions are worthwhile. When Barbara Jones

married, her husband, Hal, said to her, “There's 80 percent of me that's good and 20 percent that's not so good. If you choose to dwell on my 80 percent, we're going to be happy.” The same is true of teenagers.

A young man said, “My parents are always picking at me about something. It's like they want me to be perfect—and they want it right now.” A 16-year-old Korean-American said that everyone has the idea “all Asians are smart. . . . Having a reputation for brains is nice, I guess, but it can also be a pain. . . . My father and mother expect an awful lot out of me. . . . They want me to be #1” (“The New Teens,” *Newsweek Special Issue*, Fall/Winter 1990, p.62). Another young woman wrote the following letter, “I am the oldest of many children. My father is the bishop, and I'm expected to be the perfect example for my brothers and sisters and the perfect Mormon for the ward. Sometimes my parents expect too much. I have to excel in everything I do and never be mediocre.”

God expects perfection from his children (3 Nephi 27:27). However, he also gives us several different estates in which to grow and progress toward that lofty goal. We hear the counsel, “don't be mediocre” without remembering that the word “mediocre” comes from the Latin word, *mediocris* which means, “halfway up the mountain.” Mediocrity is not bad as long as it is not the final goal. Mediocrity is simply a halfway point through which everyone must pass on the way up the mountain. We all have to be mediocre before we can be anything beyond that.

So maybe this kid isn't winning any contests. Maybe he isn't pulling top grades. Maybe he is mediocre. Well, what's so wrong with that? He is a teenager. Right now is the time he is supposed to be going through mediocrity in many areas. So this kid wants to be in debate, but Dad wants a track star. Maybe this kid is showing an interest in car engines, and Mom would rather have him developing his skills with people. Messy rooms now don't mean that is how teenagers' homes will look some future day. Wrinkled clothes now don't mean teenagers will appear dressed inappropriately at their first job interview.

One young man put it this way, “I wish my parents understood that my effort doesn't always correlate with my achievement. Sometimes I put forth a lot of effort, and I don't always have great achievement. But that achievement, however small, is a success for me because I have tried my best. I don't mind high expectations being put on me—like the standards in *For the Strength of Youth*—because that keeps me striving. But when expectations are too high or unrealistic then it is discouraging.” Prophets have stated the expectation that all worthy young men should serve missions. Such an expectation is healthy, unlike the expectation of a father who might say, “I hope you get called to Japan on your mission because they always send the smart ones to Japan, and then you'll have a good language for business school.”

Imagine the son receiving a call to serve in a neighboring state. Measured against the reasonable and selfless expectation of the prophet and the Lord, this young man's self-esteem can soar. Measured against his father's unreasonable and selfish expectation, the young man's self-esteem will be challenged.

“R” Stands for Respect.

I wish they understood that the things I do are just because I'm an individual. I wish they understood that I am me and my little brother is separate from me. We're two different people.

Barbara Jones has trained five girls who have won the title of Miss USA. It surprises some to find out that this training is not teaching them how to fit into the mold of a beauty pageant queen. Instead, she helps them to discover and accentuate the things that are unique about each of them. That's what makes them winners.

One of these young ladies is Michelle Royer. She is a beautiful young woman who stands over six feet tall. She wrote Barbara a letter as she was getting ready to go to the national Miss USA pageant, where she ultimately won the crown. She said, "I never could really put into words how much I appreciate you or how much I've grown in the past few months. When people ask me how you've helped me, I tell them besides giving me Texas on a silver platter, you've given me the opportunity to learn on my own. Never before have I been able to rely so much on myself. That's a pretty good feeling considering the next month ahead of me. It sure feels good not to be scared any more. Some of my so-called friends in school and in other beauty pageants make me, or should I say I let them make me, feel insecure because I never fit into their mold. You taught me there is no mold for Michelle Royer. I'm the only one. Thank goodness. I hope that you'll be proud of me when I compete in the Miss USA pageant."

Barbara believes one of the reasons Michelle won that year was because she figured out that she is a unique person. The people who met her and talked with her admired her confidence and relaxed manner. People respected her for her individuality.

I grew up in a family of all brothers and no sisters. My brothers all happened to be good athletes; I was not. My dad respected that. He expected me to learn how to handle a ball. He personally taught me how to catch, throw, dribble, and pass. But, beyond that, he respected what I wanted to do. I attended my brothers' games and athletic events. They, in turn, attended my school plays and music recitals. I got negative put-downs at school for not being such a good ball player, and I always felt uncomfortable at Mutual, when every week the activity was the same—basketball in the Church gym. The thing that got me through all of that was being able to come home to a safe place where parents and family respected me for just being me.

“E” Stands for Encourage.

Parents could compliment us on the little things and boost our egos up and encourage us. They could say, "You can do whatever it is you want to do. We believe in you. It doesn't matter if you win. Just have fun!"

When Sharlene Wells Hawkes competed in the Miss America pageant, she had some pretty discouraging times. She won five dresses from JC Penney's as a wardrobe. That was it. Since the competitors usually stand in alphabetical order, as Miss Utah, she was always standing next to Miss Texas, who had furs and diamonds. Many times, photographers would say to her, "Could you move over, Miss Utah, so we can take a few pictures of Miss Texas?" Sharlene would back

out of the way. It was embarrassing.

Then came the night when the pageant held the parade on the famous Boardwalk. Sharlene said that everyone was gathered around a convertible and each contestant would sit, in turn, in the car and wave to the crowd. She said each girl would wave her hand, the photographers would take her picture, and reporters would interview her.

When Miss Texas sat in the car, many flashes from the cameras went off, and interviewers were asking lots of questions. When it was Sharlene's turn, she sat in the convertible in her JC Penny's dress and raised her hand to wave. There was not one flash. There was not one question.

Sharlene walked back to the hotel and felt like crying. She said she bit her lip and thought, "Oh, no you don't, Sharlene. You have three things that you can count on. One is your belief in Jesus Christ. The second is your belief in yourself. The third is that your family is behind you."

Her parents taught her that. Elder and Sister Wells taught her that she could believe in Christ, herself, and her family. That support and encouragement was consistent and unwavering. Had Sharlene never won the title of Miss America, she still would have come away from that pageant secure in the support of her family.

Chris, a 17-year-old from Huntington Beach, California, said, "I really love my parents. They support and encourage me in everything I do, and that is what probably helps me the most. When I feel that encouragement, it makes me feel that I don't have to go out and drink or party. It gives me self-confidence so I can overcome temptation. I don't think I'd be the kind of person I am without the encouragement and support of my parents."

"N" stands for Notice.

Instead of always asking me to do more around the house, they could thank me for what I've done and maybe notice that I'm trying to help.

One father said, "When my children became teenagers, I realized quickly that I needed to have eyes in the back of my head. Now, I guess I need to train those eyes to see the positive and ignore the negative." Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone said, "It's too easy sometimes to look at the dirt on the flower's petal rather than the beauty of the flower" (*A Generation of Excellence*, p. 108).

A mother that I know told about a little experiment she tried with her teenage son. Rather than continuing to harp at him as she had done for months for having a negative attitude around the house, she decided to simply compliment him when he did better. When he took out the garbage, she said, "Thank you." When his report card came home with mostly A's and B's but one D, she forced herself to say "that's great that you have so many high grades" instead of jumping on him about the low grade that first caught her eye. At the end of several weeks she reported, "He is doing much better, and his countenance has brightened around the house. All this time I kept thinking that my job was to change him and his attitude, but it was me who needed to change."

She smiles when she says, “The trick I am finally learning is to catch him doing something right instead of doing something wrong.”

Along with noticing the good things teenagers do, it is also important to notice when they need to talk or open up. One girl told us, “My dad may not always be the most sensitive person in the world, but when something is really bothering me, he always seems to notice. He'll come up to my room and say, ‘Want to talk about it?’ I always say, ‘How did you know something was wrong?’ and he just smiles.”

“T” stands for Time.

We never do things as a family—ever. We go our own separate ways. (If your parents said you were all going as a family to do something, would you say, “Oh this is stupid”?) I would. At first I would hate it and think it was stupid, but then it would get better and I'd be glad.

Research shows that the average parent spends less than ten minutes a day talking with each child. And much of that talking is harsh, judgmental and critical (*Working on the Dream*, Intermountain Health Care, Inc., 1991). No wonder Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said we must, “spend more time with and devote more of our energy to the good things, the best things, the things that endure and bless and prevail” (*In Earth As It Is in Heaven*, Deseret Book, p.152). We love the LDS ad on the radio: “So you want to build a relationship with your teenager? Take your time.”

Many families find the only way to bring busy lives together is to make time rather than wait for time. One father said, “I look at it this way. If I were invited to attend a dinner at the White House or to do something else I really want to do, that strong desire would alter my schedule. I would simply make time for it. It is said that good intentions will never replace good attentions.”

Family home evening is a wonderful opportunity for time together. Teenagers may say they don't like it, but they do. My daughter, Wendee, was in second grade, and I asked what her favorite part of school was. She said, “Recess.”

I asked, “What do you do at recess?”

“Chase the boys.”

“What do you do when you catch the boys?”

“We take them to jail,” Wendee said matter-of-factly.

“What do you do with them when they are in jail?”

“We hug 'em.”

I said, “Wendee, you better stop that. The boys don't like it.”

She said, “Daddy, they say they don't like it, but they do.”

Even though teens may fight it at first, they really do like it when parents and leaders spend time with them. Time together can reduce the influences of the outside world and increase the influences we have on each other.

“S” stands for Say.

The thing I have the hardest time with is that my parents still treat me like I'm a baby. The leaders at the Church do too. It's like I can't be trusted to do anything on my own, and what I think or want to do makes no difference even if I have a good idea.

Give young people a say. Unrealistic expectations, habitual nagging, or long lists of “musts,” “don'ts,” and “can'ts” often leave young people feeling helplessly fenced in. Teenagers need to feel that they can influence their own lives. They must be able to have input, make changes, and affect their environment. We must offer them a voice in deciding on the nature and complexity of their goals.

One father, with eight children, said, “Kids need guidelines and when I have to say no, I'm not afraid to say it. In my job I have guidelines and people say no to me a lot. But, within those guidelines, I also have freedom in my work—a sense of ownership that makes what I do fulfilling and satisfying. That's the same kind of balance and ownership I try to offer my teenagers.”

The year before my mission, I had the incredible opportunity to serve as the only youth representative on the National Executive Board of the Boy Scouts of America. I was working with remarkable men—presidents of large companies and corporations—who were making important decisions about the future of the Scouting program.

In one meeting, they were discussing why Scouts would not wear the pants of the Scout uniform. They debated long and loud about cost of the pants and whether they were comfortable. Finally, the chairman said, “Brad, you're our youth representative; why won't the Scouts wear the pants?” Everyone turned and looked at me. Presidents of national and international corporations were listening to an eighteen-year-old. I cleared my throat and said, “It has nothing to do with comfort or cost; it's just that the pants look really geeky. They're not cool.” Light bulbs went on. Heads nodded. Assignments were made. The men in that meeting were glad a young person had been given a chance to express his views. I still smile to myself when I see the newer uniforms—more fashionable, more athletic looking, and definitely more “cool.”

P-A-R-E-N-T-S: As easily as we can spell the word, we can remember to build self-esteem in teenagers by Praising, Accepting, Respecting, Encouraging, Noticing and spending Time together. We can give them a say and a sense of ownership in their lives. Just as each child is unique, each will react to these things differently. Some of these suggestions may have to be tailored to fit individual circumstances. The same ideas can help us build our own feelings of self-esteem as well. However, perhaps the most important thing we can do for our children and ourselves is to remember that self-esteem and self-worth are different things, as different as cubic zirconias and diamonds.

“They're just beautiful,” the wife exclaimed as she opened the gift from her husband and excitedly took out diamond earrings to match her wedding band. “Thank you,” she said sincerely.

Her husband beamed to see his wife so pleased. She had once mentioned that she would like such a pair of earrings. He had saved a little each month for several years in order to buy them. The only problem was that the wife, thinking that there was no way in the world the husband could have afforded real diamonds, thought they were cubic zirconias. In the months that followed, she wore the earrings casually. She was careless when she put them on and took them off, and finally she misplaced one. When she told her husband, he became very concerned. Only then did she realize that the diamonds were real. The worth of the stones had never changed. What *had* changed was how she esteemed the stones.

In the same way, it is essential for us to realize, regardless of how we presently esteem ourselves, that we are of great worth. That fact never changes. The many self-esteem seminars, movements, task forces, councils, musical presentations, and school training programs being offered today all miss the final mark if they do not lead participants past self-esteems to actual self-worth. True self-worth, like true religion, is revealed. An understanding of our true identities comes from the same source all truth comes from—God. Many in the world today, much like the churches and sects of Joseph Smith's day, exist on part truths—having the appearance of self-esteem but denying the power thereof. As surely as Joseph did, each of us needs a pillar of light—a clear picture of God, our relationship to him, and the knowledge that what we are doing is in accordance with His will for us. Esteem will increase as we realize our eternal worth.

One young woman struggled with self-esteem during her teen years. She told a youth leader, “So-and-so told me I’m too fat, and so-and-so told me I’m not fun to be with. I’m not as pretty or as popular as my best friend. Not one boy has ever asked me out.”

Her leader asked, “Did you ever go to the carnival fun house and look in the mirrors?”

“Yes,” she said, “but what does that have to do with anything?”

The leader explained, “Those mirrors distort the truth. If we really believe the images of ourselves that we see in those mirrors, it could cause some major problems. Can you imagine curling your hair or putting on makeup using one of those mirrors? It’s the same way with self-esteem. Using the eyes of the world as our only mirrors will leave us with a distorted view. What others think of us or say about us is important, but it can’t be our only source of information.”

The leader explained that only as we look in the eyes of our Father in Heaven will we see a true reflection of ourselves. Then we will see who we are eternally, and God will validate our self-worth regardless of how others esteem us or even how we esteem ourselves.

George D. Durrant wrote, “What someone else thinks about me is not the driving force for me that it once was” (*My Best Day So Far*, Bookcraft, p. 53). That is the point that we must all reach—making self-esteem less horizontal (relying on the input and influence of others) and more vertical (relying on the input and influence of God).

Speaking at youth programs opens the door for receiving compliments. As speakers and teachers at Education Week conclude their comments, many people are courteous enough to approach

them and say something kind. Casual onlookers might wonder if this praise is the source of self-esteem for these speakers. What those onlookers do not see are the jealous comments and hurtful letters that sometimes come criticizing even the most sincere efforts of teachers who are in such a public arena. Such letters could be the end of teaching for those whose only source of self-esteem is the input of others. However, most Church Education teachers do what they do in order to serve God and their fellow men. This knowledge brings balance. It doesn't matter if fifty people express compliments after a lecture if the teacher does not feel that God is pleased with his motives and work. On the other hand, some people may criticize a teacher and find fault, but if the teacher honestly feels that God is pleased with his offerings, he can be at peace. God validates worth regardless of how others esteem.

Stephen R. Covey said, "The only sure anchor to personal security is in God and in God's definition of man" (*Spiritual Roots of Human Relations*, Deseret Book, p. 23). In the temple we learn much about God's definition of man. We are reminded of our literal kinship with him. We are all his spirit children and are of infinite worth. We wear white robes as a symbol of purity and to help eliminate any distinction between rich and poor. Hoods or tassels are not worn by those with worldly degrees and titles. No tags or ribbons indicate a bishop or Relief Society president. In the temple we are all equal. The qualifications for entering the temple do not include beauty or talent or worldly acclaim. The only requirement for wearing temple robes is personal worthiness.

What can parents and leaders do to help young people feel closer to God and realize their individual worth? The answer is to involve them in service. A bishop on BYU campus, Thomas E. Myers, said, "Young people with low self-esteem are in a downward cycle. Service is the cycle breaker. As they become so busy serving and blessing and healing others, they will not even notice that they are being blessed and healed themselves." As we help to raise a healthy concern for others in the lives of teenagers, we diminish the effects of their unhealthy concern for self.

Sister Patricia T. Holland said that when she and her family first moved to Provo, it was a difficult and insecure time for her then teenage son, Matt. He prayed every night to make the varsity basketball team, be a good student, and have enough confidence to make friends. Later, when he was serving his mission, Matt realized something important. He said, "I had gone about the confidence matter in entirely the wrong way. It was only in my intense and heartfelt desire to serve others as a missionary that I found what true confidence really was. When asking for my own needs [to be met] in those high school years, I was not reassured. Even now if I ask for his help to have more popularity or to look good in the eyes of others, I lose that confidence. But on my mission when I wanted to reach unbelievers for *their* sake, for what I knew I could give *them*, I had the confidence of Joshua and Jeremiah combined" (*On Earth As It Is in Heaven*, Deseret Book, pp. 45-46).

My junior high experience was rough. A boy with no basket-shooting skills suffers in elementary school and agonizes in junior high. All the students came from different elementary schools into one huge gathering pot and, in their own insecurity, many picked on others. Somehow in the shuffle, I ended up at the bottom of the pecking order. Each day I had to face the threats, rejection, and hurtful criticisms of my classmates. Once in that position it seemed that nothing I

could do was right. If I tried to talk and be friendly, I would be mocked. If I didn't, I would be made fun of anyway. I hated the pain and the hurt. But—and this is the point—through it all I did not hate myself.

I always had the feeling that they just didn't know me. Because of the praise, acceptance and encouragement of parents and Church leaders, I liked myself. Because I knew I was valuable in God's eyes, I valued myself. The fact that the kids at school didn't like me did not seem like evidence that I was a bad person. Rather it was simply evidence that they did not know me.

As my classmates and I grew and matured, we did come to know each other better. I reached out in service and my efforts brought acceptance. In fact, at my senior dinner dance when awards were passed out, I was not voted best looking or most likely to succeed. Instead I was given an award that meant much more to me than any other award ever could. I was named the most-loved senior. This award came from many of the same students who literally spat on me in the halls of our junior high school.

My self-esteem was tested, but because of a knowledge of my true self-worth, I was able to weather the storm. Perhaps, in a small way, this is the same sense of strength that the Prophet Joseph Smith must have felt during his life. He wrote, "The constable who served this second warrant upon me had no sooner arrested me than he began to abuse and insult me; and so unfeeling was he with me, that although I had been kept all the day in court without anything to eat since the morning, yet he hurried me off to Broome county, a distance of about fifteen miles, before he allowed me any kind of food whatever. He took me to a tavern, and gathered in a number of men who used every means to abuse, ridicule and insult me. They spit upon me, pointed their fingers at me, saying, 'prophesy, prophesy!' and thus did they imitate those who crucified the Savior of mankind, not knowing what they did" (*History of the Church* 1:91).

These wicked men did not know who the Prophet was. They did not esteem him. They were in the presence of a valuable diamond, and they were treating him like mere glass. Nevertheless, Joseph knew exactly who he was; he knew his relationship to God. He knew his worth in God's eyes. This knowledge allowed him to act accordingly and to weather the severest of storms.

The greatest thing we can do to improve self-esteem is to help young people come to know the Savior and realize their worth in His eyes. A young bishop once shared this story:

When I was eight years old, I was really into baseball. I had every player's baseball card. My dad saved his money to send me to a baseball camp run by a star player.

The first day, the famous guy running the camp, who was kind of cocky, had the list of names. My name is spelled S-t-e-p-h-e-n. He looked at the list and asked, "Where's old Step-han?" He purposely mispronounced my name. I cringed as everyone started to laugh.

The coach continued to call, "Step-han, are you here? Hey, Step-han."

I felt worse and worse. Everyone was laughing harder and harder. It was the worst experience of my life. When I got home, I told my dad I would never play baseball again.

My dad was a wise man and waited a few years. Then a retired player came to town and started a Little League program. Dad took the new coach aside and said, "My son loves baseball so much. But he had a bad experience with a coach." And he told the coach the whole story. The new coach said, "You send him to me for tryouts."

I barely made the team, but improved as the season progressed. Then the time came when it was a win or lose situation for my team. The bases were loaded. It was my turn at bat. I thought the coach was going to bring in a pinch hitter for me. But the coach didn't. He walked over and put his arm around me and said, "Stephen, you can do it. I'm your coach. I'm behind you all the way. You can do it."

I walked up to the plate. I did not hit the ball out of the ballpark. But I did hit a fly to the center fielder that was deep enough to allow the runner from third to tag up and beat the throw to home. Our team won the game.

Stephen's coach had faith in him. The bishop continued his story:

I'll never forget that coach. Then I grew up and got another coach in my life. My new coach came to me one night and said, "Stephen, you're going on a mission." And when I said to him, "I don't think I can do it," he said, "I have faith in you. I know you can do it." My new coach was Jesus Christ.

I went on a mission. Then my coach came to me again one night, after I had gotten married, and said, "Stephen, you're going to be in charge of the Blazer Bs."

I said, "Coach, I can't be in charge of them."
The Savior said, "Yes, you can. I have faith in you."

And then this newly called young bishop, with emotion choking him, said,

He came to me two months ago and said, "Stephen, you're going to be the bishop."

And I said, "I can't be the bishop."

The Savior said, "I'll be right beside you every step of the way."

This bishop had learned to listen to the one who knew the real him, knew his potential. His coach would support him. The best way to help young people increase self-esteem is to help them recognize their true self-worth. That's the best way to build our own feeling of self-esteem as well. We must overlook the degrading voices of the world and get a new *coach*—someone who knows us, loves us, and sees us for the true diamonds we are. We must make the Savior our *coach*.