





Self-Esteem

A Conversation

As the trusted name in photography across North America, Lifetouch helps families celebrate, display and commemorate some of the most cherished milestones of their lives — from newborn and infant portraiture to high school graduation, wedding and family portraits. We share in the excitement of Picture Day in schools and witness the power of the printed portrait. Increasingly, psychologists and parenting experts are saying what parents themselves have known all along: Portrait photography plays an important role in promoting children’s healthy self-esteem. It’s a role that Lifetouch is proud to embrace.

In an effort to further understand and support the importance of healthy self-esteem in children, we explored this fascinating and evolving parenting challenge with the help of Dr. David Walsh, founder and director of Mind Positive Parenting, whose mission is to equip parents and communities to raise children who can thrive and meet the challenges of the 21st century.

During a series of recent conversations, Dr. Walsh walked us through the origins of self-esteem theory, addressed some commonly held misconceptions, recommended what parents can do to build healthy self-esteem in their children, and shared some fascinating brain science facts about why portrait photography plays such an important role.

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“**W**hen an infant is born, their eyesight is not very good. What they can see is the distance from Mom’s chest to her face,” Dr. Walsh informs. As a result, babies key into faces very early. “Babies literally make sense out of the world based on faces, and facial reactions.”

Most of us know that when a mother smiles at her baby she increases the chances that her baby will smile back. But what many of us didn’t know until recently is what triggers that response. Scientists have learned that when we humans watch someone do just about anything, the neurons in our brains associated with those actions activate. “They’re called mirror neurons and they are extremely important in helping us read other people. When we see someone crying, our mirror neurons

associated with sadness activate in our brain. They’re what help us develop empathy,” Walsh says.

The foundation for self-esteem is laid in the first few months of life. “We are wired to connect. It’s critical to our very survival, and that’s why the ability to connect — what psychologists call attachment — is so important. Attachment parenting, translated into plain English, describes four critical characteristics of nurturing an infant: being present, attentive, attuned and responsive,” Dr. Walsh explains. In other words, when we are consistently tuned in to a baby’s needs, when a child believes they are safe, that their needs will be consistently met, they are able to develop a sense of connection with those in their family, in their world. That critical, earliest sense of belonging establishes a powerful

foundation for future connections in life. And it is the hallmark for everything that comes later.

It’s probably not surprising then that a sense of belonging plays a central role in fostering healthy brain development in children. “With that sense of belonging comes security and, from a brain point of view, the cortex is then liberated to really blossom and to work at its highest capacity,” says Walsh. Conversely, when we don’t feel connected, we feel stress, a certain level of threat. If the brain is preoccupied with responding to threat, then brain activity is forced to parts of the brain that are associated with basic survival.

The importance of connection plays out in different ways and can take many forms. Just as Walsh talks about the importance of attachment parenting



in infancy, he emphasizes several ways that parents can reinforce a strong sense of belonging throughout childhood. Forming friendships based on common interests creates strong bonds that serve them well into adulthood. “Kids have different interests. For some kids, it’s sports. For some, it’s music. For others, it’s science,” Walsh tells us. The key for parents is to help children “try on as many uniforms as possible so they see which ones they really like. That’s how they discover their best fit.” Whatever they try, it’s important to remember that the first, and most important, team of which they are part is their family.

According to Walsh, that is why portraits of children — be they school, team or family portraits — help them establish a deep and unshakable sense of belonging. He says, “One of the reasons that

Understanding Self-Esteem

The idea of self-esteem is hardly new. Psychologist William James wrote about it in 1890 in his book, *The Principles of Psychology*, defining it mathematically as the ratio of a person’s perception of their success compared to their goals. During the decades that followed, the concept resurfaced several more times in the writings of others. Abraham Maslow, in his 1954 classic, *Motivation and Personality*, introduced his now-famous model of human motivation, Hierarchy of Needs, where he described self-esteem as a necessity on the path toward self-actualization.

But it wasn’t until 1969, with the publication of Nathaniel Branden’s book, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, that the concept was offered up to a more mainstream audience. Suddenly, parents and teachers across the country were reading the book, sending it to the top of *The New York Times* Best Sellers. Indeed, the ideas put forward by Branden were so appealing and groundbreaking that, to this day, he is credited with launching what came to be known as “the self-esteem movement.”

“Unfortunately, what a lot of people, including myself, didn’t realize is that Nathaniel Branden changed the definition of self-esteem, putting the emphasis on feeling good about oneself,” says Dr. Walsh. **“Of course, there’s nothing wrong with feeling good but, as the basis for self-esteem, that interpretation led to some real myths about self-esteem.”**

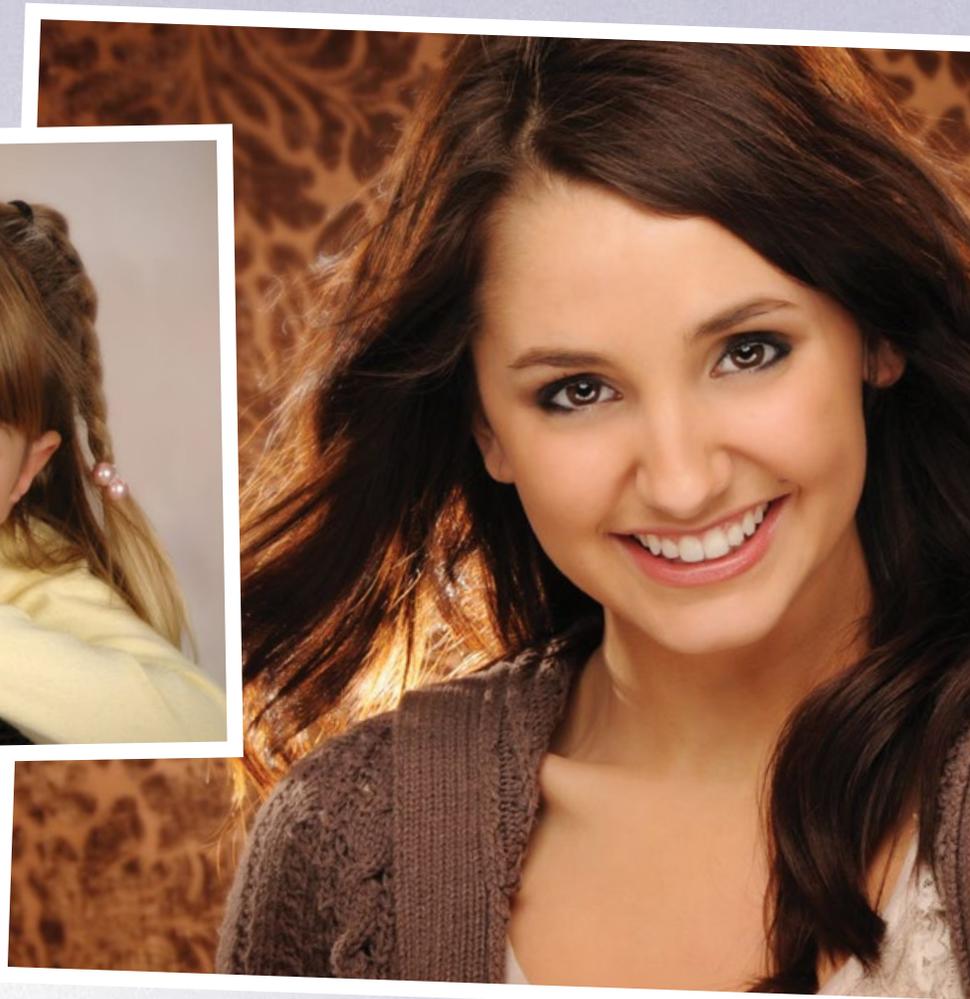
By the ’80s and ’90s, we were a nation preoccupied with boosting children’s belief in their ability and feelings of self-worth. Teachers and parents were encouraged to routinely compliment children as being in possession of countless talents and gifts, regardless of actual effort, performance or results, and to shelter them from criticism, frustration and disappointment.

Three decades later, however, with little measurable success to show for these initiatives, doubts began to surface, even among leaders within the movement. One sweeping national study, published in 2004, found the vast majority of studies failed to meet accepted scientific standards. Of those that did, none of them supported the theories behind the self-esteem movement. Educational achievement had not been raised, and delinquency and other childhood and adolescent maladies had not been reduced.

Some Praise Is Helpful and Some Is Not

“One of the myths of the self-esteem movement was that it’s our job to make kids feel good about themselves by praising them, no matter what they do,” says Dr. Walsh. “But there’s a lot of new research on praise, and it turns out that some praise really is helpful to children and some isn’t.”

In fact, a growing number of studies suggest that empty praise actually undermines children’s competence. A series of experiments conducted by psychologists, Claudia M. Mueller, Ph.D., and Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., found that students, praised for their intelligence after performing



portraiture is so powerful is that we're a very visual species. We have, of course, five senses but we have more brain cells dedicated to vision than all of the other senses combined." For that reason, Walsh says, printed images are particularly powerful in reinforcing one's sense of belonging. You know the magic of family photos, the magic of team or class pictures. "We celebrate the birthdays. We memorialize the family holiday celebrations. We remember being on that softball team." Describing the scene that is played out every time a child brings home their school yearbook, Walsh says, "The first thing they look for is to see where they show up in that book." Those printed images become a point of reference in their other relationships, too, bringing to mind a typical scene between a child and a loved one. "Here's where I am in that class picture, Grandma."

We are also reminded that it's not just children who get a boost of self-esteem from portraiture. Portraits serve as important markers of milestones in everyone's lives. "When we see photographs of ourselves at celebrations or family events, they reinforce belonging, which is so critical to all of us, not just our children."

Portraits are an important part of a family history. When choosing a photographer, keep in mind that the photographer plays two important and powerful roles: "One is the technical part, the lighting, the printing, the framing, all of those things that I don't know much about as a psychologist," Walsh admits, "but what I do know is the importance of putting children at ease, making them feel welcome." He says to look for a photographer who wants to know your child's name and uses it. "Our name is

the sweetest sound in the world. When children hear their name, it reinforces the sense of belonging and activates for them a sense of security."

Of course, we want our kids to look their best for their portraits, perhaps dressed up a bit and hair combed. But, more importantly, we want them to look happy. We want to see them smile. Walsh says to remember the power of those mirror neurons. "Children are like sponges. They absorb the behaviors they see around them. They have this radar for emotions. If we're fussing excessively over appearances, or are uptight about getting big smiles, we're very likely to get the opposite reaction. Relax," Walsh reminds us, "and so will the kids. And the smile will take care of itself."



David Walsh, Ph.D., is the author of the national best-sellers, *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen* and *No: Why Kids — of All Ages — Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It*. His latest book is *Smart Parenting, Smarter Kids: The One Brain Book You Need to Help Your Child Grow Brighter, Healthier, and Happier*. He also founded, and is former director of, the National Institute on Media and the Family, now part of Minneapolis-based Search Institute, an organization whose mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children.

well on a test, actually performed more poorly on subsequent tests than students who were complimented for how hard they had worked. Children have little control over the natural gifts they inherit. “If we’re always praising a child for how smart they are, then when something more difficult comes along, they shy away from it,” explains Walsh. “Failure means I’m not smart and I don’t want to risk that.”

Using praise effectively is a powerful thing. Walsh offers these suggestions for parents:

> Avoid praising your child’s potential, inherent ability or natural gifts. Rather, praise the things they can control: effort, improvement or achievement. For example, rather than telling your child he/she is an amazing speller, say, “I know some of those words were really hard for you. I’m proud of how you kept practicing until you got them right.”

> Avoid vague or general comments. Instead of saying, “My gosh, you’re good at math,” it’s more helpful to say, “Nice job on those division problems, especially when you checked your own work and corrected those two mistakes on your own.”

> Avoid praising children for everything. Children as young as age seven know when they’ve earned praise and when they don’t deserve it.

> Intermittent reinforcement is much more effective than constant reinforcement. “If you want evidence of that,” says Dr. Walsh, “go to a casino and watch all of the people standing in front of slot machines waiting for that intermittent reinforcement.”

Perseverance, A Key to Real Self-Esteem

Another myth borne of the self-esteem movement, Dr. Walsh points out, was the belief that difficult feelings are harmful to children, and that as nurturing adults we must shelter them from pain.

“If we define self-esteem as feeling good, we run into problems because challenge and disappointment don’t feel good. Though they come to all of us in life, sometimes, with the best of intentions, we try to protect children from experiencing them.” But once again, credible research points strongly to the necessity — and the power — of those very feelings. “Stress, challenge and disappointment are important ingredients toward developing competence,” says Walsh. **“Kids who learn perseverance, to pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again after failure, have gained a very important ingredient of real self-esteem. The way we get better is by learning from our mistakes.”** All of us want our children to be able to step up and keep going when the going gets a little rough. It might be as simple as saying, “Oops, that didn’t work. Let’s try something else.”

Because children imitate the behavior that they see routinely exhibited — thanks to those mirror neurons at work — we help them strengthen those neural pathways by repeatedly role modeling desired behaviors for them. When children see us working hard, or showing kindness or cooperating on a project, their brains start to fire on those circuits. Walsh says that’s one of the beautiful things about a child’s brain. “Whatever the brain does a lot of is what the brain gets good at.”