

For Parents of young children

A Young Child And A Growing Self

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

A child is constantly building a picture of himself, a picture that affects his attitudes about people and about life in general. Experiences with people, events, and objects help to influence this picture. Certain kinds of experiences are especially important to a child. A few of them are discussed below.

Trusting Himself

If Jimmy learns to trust himself, he can more easily learn to trust others and to be confident in new situations. One way you can give him this trust is to be sure that he has his share of love and that he has a very special place in the family. So much has been said about little children's need for love that you may think of it as something to give or take regularly like a dose of medicine. But the way you bestow love is not nearly as important as the feeling your child gains in the process. Does Jimmy know he is loved? Can you say naturally to him, "I'm so glad you're my little boy." Or can you say to your little girl, "How nice that your hair is straight. It's so easy to comb!"

If a child knows that he is loved for what he is and just the way he is, he will think he is a worthwhile person because his parents think so. He will develop a trust in himself as a person unlike any other. Because a child learns to value himself in the light of your opinions of him, you shouldn't discuss him with others when he is present. Even though you use sign language or words that you don't think he understands, he probably will know you're talking about him. And knowing it may raise some doubts in his mind about himself.

You may give your son some anxious moments about his future with a remark such as "If you don't clean up your plate,

you'll never be a football player." You may make him feel that even his best efforts won't please you. Of course, one such incident may not discourage a child, but in the longrun you want your child to feel that you like him the way he is.

Testing His Powers

As soon as little children can get around by themselves, they start testing their powers with objects and with people. Everything is something new to try out, not just to look at.

Two-year-old Jackie discovers the light switch and is intent on turning it on and off. Little wonder that it fascinates her: the switch moves when she touches it, the room lights up, and the switch may even make a noise. Jackie is testing her powers with the light switch and, when her mother enters the room, she is testing her powers with people too.

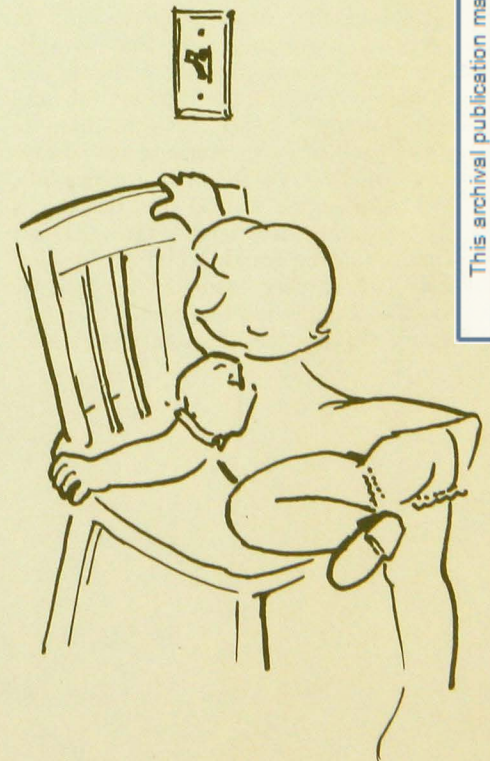
It is one thing for Jackie to be able to share this wonderful discovery with her mother when she is 2, but it is quite another to allow her to use it as a toy as she grows older. She must eventually learn to leave the light switch alone. If learning it requires punishment, at least her mother's punishment efforts should be confined to the light switch. A statement such as "Jackie is a bad girl who will never learn to leave things alone" is a "double dose" for a child and certainly won't help him gain confidence in himself.

Children sometimes need a little help to succeed in what they're doing. For example, Tommy is struggling to free his wagon, which is caught on the leg of a chair. Tommy plainly needs help, for his patience has about run out. But is it necessary for his parents to protect him from such small failures? Anthropologist Margaret Mead says that

although parents always should be available and alert to their child's needs, they should provide help only when the child requests it (see reference 1). She points out that a child who asks for help feels strong and confident, while a child given unsolicited help feels fenced in or restricted.

Seeking Support

A child's picture of himself can be greatly enhanced through the appreciation, comfort, and support he receives in times of need. Children may be silently asking for support in their moments of eagerness, discomfort, disappointment, or fear.



With what eagerness Susan presents a bouquet of dandelions or the angleworm she's just found! Of course it's hard always to stop and admire, but you can give as much time to interruptions from your children as you do to interruptions from adults. Your child will have greater respect for himself if you and others respond to him and respect him.

"Davy hit me on my arm," says Ricky as he comes in with tears streaming down his face. His arm hurts and he hurts in other ways, too. He is afraid to strike back and defend himself. What kind of comfort does Ricky need? If he lacks the courage to hit back, urging him to do so may destroy his self confidence rather than add to it. Likewise, shaming, scolding, or teasing will not help. Teaching a child to stand up for his own rights is really a matter of helping him gain confidence in all of his relationships. Of course you do have to step in when one child hurts another. On the other hand, if you show approval when an overly aggressive child strikes back, he may get the idea that fighting is the only or the best way to settle an argument. Parents must strive for a balance between being too severe with the aggressive child and expecting too much self defense from the timid one.

You can help reduce your child's fears through the kind of support you give him. Giving your child time to warm up to strangers, exploring with him when he says, "There's a big black bear in there," and explaining to him in his own language just when you'll be back will alleviate his anxieties. Being a little more sensitive to those times when your child needs your support can influence the picture he has of himself.

Occasionally, little children need to behave in a grownup way. For example, a nursery school teacher noticed this change in one little boy's picture of himself. Timmy's father brought him to nursery school every morning and always removed Timmy's hat, coat, snowpants, and boots before leaving. But one morning his father didn't have time. At first Timmy said he couldn't undress by himself. The teacher assured him that he could and suggested that he try. The task wasn't easy; it took him nearly 45 min-

utes. But when he had accomplished it, Timmy was much happier with himself and began to take a greater delight in his surroundings.

Nursery school teachers observe countless situations in which the mastering of a physical skill affects a child's social relations. Mary Jean came to school and announced that she had learned to stand

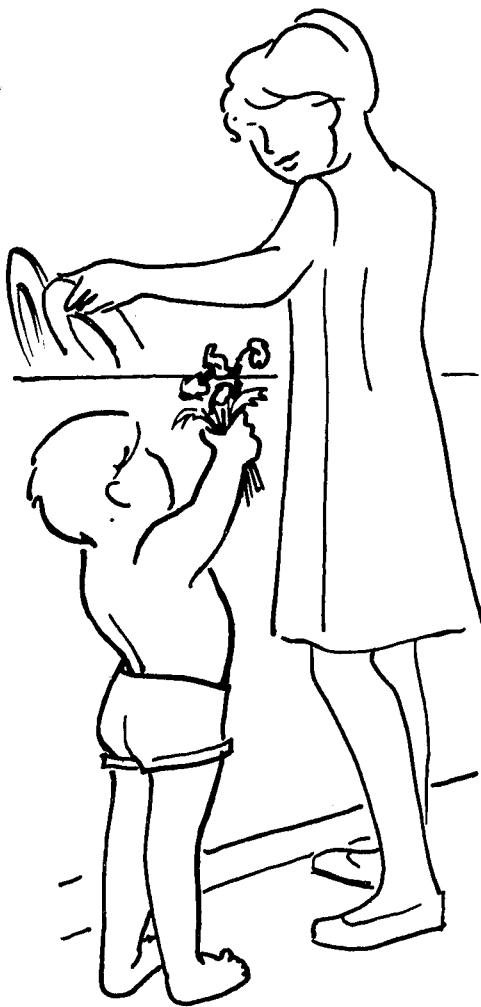
on her head. She immediately proceeded to demonstrate her skill to the other children. They watched wide-eyed and for that moment at least, Mary Jean was top in their eyes.

Children who can master a physical skill or who feel they are grownup at least part of the time view themselves in a favorable light. Of course, they have their moments of doubt, but if you can help them trust themselves and if you can share in their moments of eagerness and give them support in times of need, their moments of uncertainty will be more bearable.

The way a child views the world and the people in it is colored by the way he views himself. And he forms his view of himself partially by observing how people relate to him.

References

1. Mead, Margaret, *Creative Life for Your Children*, Headliner Series No. 1, Children's Bureau Publication. Available from Superintendent of Documents.
2. *Understanding Children 1 to 6*, Circular 645, Extension Service, College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
3. Wolf, Anna W. M., *Your Child's Emotional Health*, Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 264. (25¢) Write: Public Affairs Pamphlets, 22 East 38th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.



What can you say when Mary proudly shows you her creation and it looks like nothing you ever saw before? You can say, "Tell me about it." In this way, you may get a clue and you'll help Mary expand her ideas by giving her something to talk about.

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