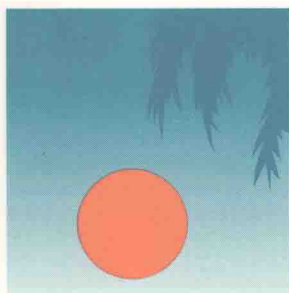


Self-Esteem and the Six-Second Secret

Connie Podesta



*"Today is a new day.
From this moment on,
each of us must take
responsibility for the
rest of our lives."*

Self-Esteem
and the
Six-Second
Secret

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Foreword

Having the responsibility of shaping the lives of today's youth is indeed complex. As a junior high school guidance counselor and mother of two teenagers, I have spent many hours contemplating what steps we need to take to ensure that our children become confident, happy adults.

I have read many books on self-esteem that tell us to praise children and avoid harsh criticism. As a teacher, mother, and counselor, I have attempted to do this with my children, students, and clients. I have encouraged and worked with parents to develop skills such as active listening, behavior modifications, using natural consequences, and positive reinforcement. Yet, even with these tools, I was still seeing children, including at times my own, who lacked the confidence needed to accomplish their goals.

Connie Podesta's book, *Self-Esteem and the Six-Second Secret*, has allowed me the opportunity to look at self-esteem from a different point of view. For the first time, I understand that many of the things we say or do that we believe to be positive may, in fact, be interpreted as negative. I also have a clearer understanding of the important part *attention* plays in our relationships.

I found myself both laughing and crying. Connie's stories will hit home with you, I imagine, just as they did with me. There were times I felt she had been in *my* house, in *my* living room with *my* family. It was comforting to know that we all make the same mistakes.

This is one book you will want to keep close at hand to read over and over again. I recommend it for anyone

wishing to improve an important relationship, not just those relationships dealing with children. Connie Podesta's six-second secret has made a real difference in my life.

Jennifer Fortenberry
Guidance Counselor
Clearwood Junior High
Slidell, Louisiana

Who Can Use This Book?

This book has been written so that young people as well as adults can read and enjoy it. I have tried to write the same way I would talk to you if you were here with me: from my heart with common sense—and a bit of humor.

I have received many letters and telephone calls from around the country. People of all ages have wanted to tell me how this book has helped them and how it has helped others in their lives.

Here are ways the book can be used by different individuals:

Students: Young people from fifth grade and up have read this book and shared it with their friends *and* parents. One junior high school student wrote, “Thank you for your book. My mom has never felt very good about herself, and it made me feel bad because I think she is a really neat person. I gave her your book, and we talked about it. She said if it would help me, she would work to like herself better.”

Parents: We never know *everything* there is to know about our children. I try in the following pages to shed light on one aspect of growing up into secure, confident adults. Parents tell me it helps. One mother wrote, “I leave your book by the side of the bed. It’s where I’m assured of peace and quiet away from the kids, and I can go read it when I need it the most.”

Husbands and wives can also read it together, then ask their children to discuss it with them. Some stimulating conversations are bound to result!

Teachers (with students): Many teachers read the book aloud, or have students read it at home, and then discuss it in class. The ideas and examples presented lend themselves to class discussions, particularly when students are encouraged to relate their own experiences. I've had many students write me with their own personal stories as a result.

Teachers (with parents): Often teachers need to meet with the parent(s) of a child who is struggling with self-esteem. And often it is difficult to explain to the parent what self-esteem is *without* the parent feeling defensive or at fault. In these cases, teachers send the book home with the child and ask that the parents read it before coming in for the teacher-parent conference. Parents then come in with ideas and suggestions of their own and truly participate in developing a plan of action.

Counselors: I used this book in my private practice with clients and have had many other counselors tell me they do the same. It can be given as a reading assignment to parents, couples, young people, and older clients. The principles outlined go hand-in-hand with concepts explored in group and family therapy.

School counselors, social workers, mental health counselors, drug and alcohol counselors—indeed anyone working with youth or with any individual who could benefit from increased self-esteem—can use the book to reinforce the message of the counseling program.

Healthcare personnel: In healthcare facilities throughout the country, this book can be found in education department libraries and gift shops. "Guest relations" programs

have used it to send the message that self-esteem is the foundation of treating others with dignity and respect.

Managers in the workplace: Skills that help us become better parents also help us become better managers. Indeed, family and work are both businesses. Each have a budget, departments, bosses and workers, rules and policies, and *problems*.

Acknowledgments

As I write this, I think of the Academy Awards ceremony. The stars seem to go on forever thanking people we've never heard of while we're saying, "OK, OK! Let's get on with the show."

Until this moment, I never realized that it wasn't important at all that 99% of the people watching didn't know or care about the recipients of the thank-yous and praise. It was only important to the people it was intended for.

So this is my personal page to tell the people special only to me:

Thank You

Thanks to my sister, Vicki—You have always been my friend as well as my sister. You are a talented speaker, actress, songwriter, and will have a book of your own out soon, I'm sure. You've always been there to give me support in time of trouble, advice in time of frustration, and lots of great fun, no matter what the time. I may be the older, but you are often the wiser.

Thanks to my friend, Jenny—we walked miles together in the hopes of attaining our youthful figures again. Instead, I gained five pounds and a friend who would listen, care enough to be honest, and laugh with me even when life wasn't funny.

Thanks to my daughters, Nicki and Marcie—I wish I had known all along the things in this book *before* you were born. Instead, the three of us learned the hard way—through trial and error, but always with love. Now it's your turn.

Thanks to my teachers at Southwood Junior High and Rich Central High School—You believed in me, encouraged me, put up with me, and challenged me. I have spent my life teaching others. Always remembering how well others taught me. Thank you.

And the Most Special Thank You of All Goes to You, My Husband, Larry—your support and encouragement to “go for it” has always been there—just like you. Please don't be fooled—even when I seem the most confident and sure of myself, I'm glancing over to make sure you're beside me.



I dedicate this book to my parents,
Kathy and Bill Purvis,
who were always proud of even my small-
est accomplishments
and accepted my flaws without disappoint-
ment.

I would never have had the confidence
to pursue so many different paths in my life
if it were not for their constant
message that I was “OK,”
even when I faltered or made mistakes.

That was their special gift to me—
a gift I try daily to pass on to my daughters,
Nicole and Marcie.



If you're like me, there are a thousand things that need to be done right now that seem more important than reading this book. In fact, if you are really like me, this book has been sitting in your "read it later" pile waiting for that perfect time when everything is done and you can just relax and do something for yourself.

Have you even made it this far without the phone ringing, the kids crying, or UPS wanting your signature? If so, *great!* If not, I understand. After all, it took me two years to find the time to *write* this book.

Have you ever wondered how we all got so busy? And if it's worth the effort? I have. Sometimes I look at my children who are growing up so quickly, and I wish I could start all over again. I'd nag less and hug more. I'd talk less and listen more. I'd react less and feel more. But most of all I'd do everything I could to make them feel like they were capable of achieving their most wonderful dreams.

Have you ever had those same thoughts?

If you have, then maybe we ought to do something about it. We can't start over—but we sure can start tomorrow. (That's not procrastinating—you need *today* to finish the book.)

So ship the kids off to play for a while, take the phone off the hook, and sit back in your favorite chair, because I'm going to tell you a secret. It's a secret about self-esteem and a six-second miracle. It's a secret that can make life a lot happier. There is only one thing different about this secret—you can tell everyone you meet, because the sooner this secret is out, the better our world could be.

Right about now, you might be asking, “How come *she* knows this secret and I don’t?” That’s a strange thing, too. When you finish this book, you are going to say:

“I knew that!”

And you did. But it’s one of those secrets we just keep forgetting. That’s why I decided to write this book—I never want to forget it again.

When I think of self-esteem, I get a bit sad. Sad because the idea is really so simple, but putting it into effect can be so hard. Sad because what I say out of love may be interpreted as criticism and I don’t even realize it. Sad because some of the things I do out of a deep desire to raise my children to greater heights may be exactly what pull them down.

If, after you’ve read these first two pages, I’ve touched any tiny chord, let’s work on this together. Let’s figure out this whole self-esteem bit once and for all, because that’s the easy part. The hard part is reaching inside and taking a long, hard look at just how much we like ourselves before we dare to reach out to our children.

So, Just Exactly What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is currently a buzz word, from the psychologist working with the family, to the teacher in the classroom, to the mom entering her three-year-old into preschool. We read about it in magazines, we hear about it

at PTA meetings, and we can see how it affects those around us.

Professionals argue about the best way to instill self-esteem in our kids if it isn't there to begin with, and how to raise it if it is. But self-esteem is not something we can raise or lower at will. Many books and articles have been written on the subject (such as the *wonderful* one you are now reading!) but the arguments about self-esteem still rage.

When asked to define self-esteem, almost everyone answers in one of three ways:

1. Self-esteem is how someone feels about himself or herself.
2. Self-esteem is how much someone likes himself or herself.
3. Self-esteem is the amount of confidence a person has in himself or herself.

I think to truly understand self-esteem, however, we must look deeper than those definitions alone. It is not sufficient to just like oneself, as evidenced by the fact that there are many people who like themselves so much that they are obnoxious and inconsiderate of others.

The Final Report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem contains the following definition. I share this with you because it puts into words what many of us have been feeling—that the real issue of self-esteem has to do with how we treat others as much as it does with how we feel about ourselves. It reads:

“Appreciating my own worth and importance and having the character to be accountable for myself and to act responsibly toward others.”

What this means is that self-esteem is of little value if we do not use our good feelings to love, nurture, and encourage others around us.

No one denies that a healthy, solid sense of self-esteem is one of the most important gifts we can give a child. Everyone agrees that a child with high self-esteem is far less apt to use drugs, get in trouble with the law or at school, have inappropriate sexual relationships, or suffer from poor grades and unsatisfying peer group relationships.

So, if we know what self-esteem means and we all agree it is important...

What's the Problem?

The problem is that good definitions and honest intentions aren't enough.

Most parents believe that if they praise their kids regularly, “*Honey, I'm so-o-o proud of you. Why that's a beautiful picture!*” and avoid put-downs, “*Shut up! How could you be so stupid?*,” it should be enough to keep the child's self-esteem in one piece.

Yet many parents who make a point of avoiding constant criticism and who use compliments and encouragement as much as possible still find themselves face to face with children they love dearly but who do not have much self-confidence.

To understand the “Six-Second Secret” and put it into effect, you have to first understand and believe that the driving force behind us all (once our basic needs for food, shelter, and warmth are met) is the need for:

Attention.

I’ve yet to meet a person whose reactions, needs, thoughts, and actions are not centered around this desire for attention. We are a species that needs other people. We all want more than anything to be loved, respected, admired, appreciated, and recognized as special human beings.

In fact, the complete absence of attention can destroy a child emotionally and, in some cases, physically. In *Dare to Discipline*, Dr. James Dobson tells us, “It has been known for several decades that an infant who is not loved, touched, or caressed will often die. Evidence of this fact was observed as early as the thirteenth century, when Frederick II conducted an experiment with fifty infants. He wanted to see what language the children would speak if they never had the opportunity to hear the spoken word. To accomplish this dubious research project, he assigned foster mothers to bathe and suckle the children, but forbade them to fondle, pet, or talk to their charges. The experiment failed because all fifty infants died.” (Bantam Books, 1970, p. 33.)

There is also a recorded experiment done by the Nazis during World War II. They took several babies and put half in one room and half in another. The temperatures in the rooms, the feeding schedules, and all other variables were the same.

The mothers in one room, however, were instructed to give the babies constant attention. So the mothers rocked

them, held them, loved them, talked to them, and nurtured them. And, even in a concentration camp, these babies thrived! They gained weight, their cheeks were rosy, they smiled, they cooed.

The other babies were taken away from their mothers and given to caretakers who were instructed to give them no attention. They did feed them, but they averted their heads when feeding them. They never made eye contact with the babies, never looked at them, never spoke to them, never picked them up, never touched them, never turned them over.

This last group of babies began losing weight and withdrawing. This is often referred to as “failure to thrive” or the Love Deprivation Theory. Slowly, these babies began to die.

The only variable in these babies was attention. We are a species that will *die* without attention. Are you saying to yourself right now, “Well, I know attention is important, but I’ve never known anyone to really die from lack of it.”

Think about it. If people don’t feel loved and appreciated by those around them, if they feel neglected, maybe they won’t die physically, but they can make the choice to die in other, equally devastating ways. They can “die” emotionally through drugs, alcohol, depression, or withdrawal. And if they feel completely disconnected, they can contemplate or actually commit suicide.

For some reason, however, attention has gotten a bad rap lately. People say with disgust, “Oh, all they want is attention,” as if wanting attention is automatically a bad thing.

I have heard parents of children who have attempted or threatened suicide say, “They’re just trying to get attention.”