

# *Beyond Self-Esteem:*

## **Developing a Genuine Sense of Human Value**

**Nancy E. Curry and  
Carl N. Johnson**

RESEARCH MONOGRAPH OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN, VOLUME 4

*Beyond  
Self-Esteem:*  
**Developing a  
Genuine Sense of  
Human Value**

**Nancy E. Curry and  
Carl N. Johnson**

**National Association for the Education of Young Children  
Washington, DC**

*To J.T. McL., who has enhanced my self-understanding and self-esteem through his support, challenges, and most of all, his acceptance. (NEC)*

*To my parents, who provided my first awareness of the dynamic balance between acceptance and the need to achieve. (CNJ)*

Copyright © 1990 by Nancy E. Curry and Carl N. Johnson. All rights reserved. Second printing, 1992.

**Photo credits:** Hildegard Adler, *p. 22, 59*; Nancy P. Alexander, *p. 29, 103*; Subjects & Predicates, *p. 33, 36, 70, 134*; Ginger Howard, *p. 43*; Francis Wardle, *p. 47*; © Jim Bradshaw 1990, *p. 51, 106*; © Crystal Images 1990, *p. 57*; Beth Chepote, *p. 77*; Barbara Brockmann, *p. 81*; public domain, *p. 85, 125*; Elisabeth Nichols, *p. 100, 122*; © Renee Stockdale 1990, *p. 116*; © Cheryl Namkung, *p. 139*; Skjold Photographs, *p. 144*; Kay Freeman, *p. 158*; Dianne Carter, *p. 160*.

**National Association for the Education of Young Children**  
1834 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20009-5786

The National Association for the Education of Young Children attempts through its publications program to provide a forum for discussion of major issues and ideas in our field. We hope to provoke thought and promote professional growth. The views expressed or implied are not necessarily those of the Association.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-62662

ISBN 0-935989-39-0

**NAEYC #143**

*Book production:* Jack Zibulsky

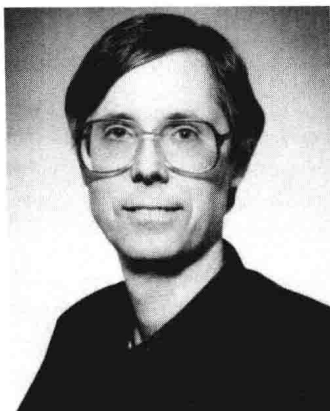
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

# About the Authors

---



**Nancy E. Curry** is Professor in the Child Development and Child Care Program in the School of Social Work, and holds joint appointments with the Schools of Health Related Professions, Medicine, and Education at The University of Pittsburgh. She has written numerous articles on sociodramatic play as a curricular and therapeutic tool. Her special interests include affective and social development of young children and quality child care.



**Carl N. Johnson** is an Associate Professor in the Child Development and Child Care Program in the School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh. Teaching in an applied program with a continuing interest in basic research, he has long struggled to make bridges between research and practice, hard science and clinical intuition. He is currently studying young children's concepts of magic and early self-understanding.

# Source Notes

---

**Page 21.** Reprinted with permission of International Universities Press From “Ego and reality in psychoanalytic theory” by R.W. White in *Psychological Issues, Monograph 3*. Copyright © 1963 by International Universities Press.

**Page 31.** Reprinted with permission of Merrill, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company from *Teaching Infants and Preschoolers with Handicaps* by Donald B. Bailey, Jr., and Mark Wolery. Copyright © 1984.

**Pages 48–49.** Reprinted with permission of Erlbaum Publishers from “A developmental theory of friendship and acquaintanceship processes” by J. Gottman and J. Parkhurst in W. Collins (Ed.), *Minnesota symposium on child psychology, vol. 13*. Copyright © 1980.

**Page 50.** From *Children's Friendships* by Z. Rubin. Reprinted with permission of Harvard University Press. Copyright © 1980 by Harvard University Press. All rights reserved.

**Page 53.** From *Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at 4* by Vivian G. Paley. Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press. Copyright © 1988 by The University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved.

**Page 73.** Shepard, L.A. and M.E. Smith. Synthesis of research on school readiness and kindergarten retention. *Educational Leadership 44*, pp. 78–86. Reprinted with permission of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Copyright © 1986 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.

**Pages 94–95.** From *The Magic Years* by Selma H. Fraiberg. Copyright © 1959 Selma H. Fraiberg; copyright renewed. Reprinted with permission of Charles Scribner's Sons, an imprint of the Macmillan Publishing Company.

**Page 110.** From *Beginnings of Social Understanding* by J. Dunn. Reprinted with permission of Basil Blackwell, Inc. Copyright © 1988 by Basil Blackwell, Inc. All rights reserved.

**Page 119.** From *Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at 4* by Vivian G. Paley. Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press. Copyright © 1988 by The University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved.

**Page 124.** From *Working with under fives* by D.J. Wood, L. McMahon, and Y. Cranstoun. Reprinted with permission of High/Scope Press. Copyright © 1980 by High/Scope Press. All rights reserved.

**Pages 140–141.** From “A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Children’s Expressions of Conflicting Feelings and a Technique to Facilitate Such Expression in Play Therapy” by S. Harter. In *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 45, p. 427. Copyright © 1977 by American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.

**Page 143.** From *Children’s Friendships* by Z. Rubin. Reprinted with permission of Harvard University Press. Copyright © 1980 by Harvard University Press. All rights reserved.

**Page 159.** From “Self-esteem and failure in school: Analysis and policy implications” by M.V. Covington. In A.M. Mecca, N.J. Smelser, and J. Vasconellos (Eds.), *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*. Reprinted with permission of The University of California Press. Copyright © 1990 by The University of California Press. All rights reserved.



# Acknowledgments

**T**HE AUTHORS WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE the editorial help of Janet Brown McCracken. Her suggestions, recastings of material, and steady hand facilitated progress of this endeavor and greatly enhanced the final product. Polly Greenberg's dream in creating this volume may have seemed nightmarish at times, but her conviction, suggestions, exhortations, assurance, and decision to bring Jan into the project brought it to fruition.

To Colleen Scholl we extend our appreciation for her willingness to do the word processing of innumerable editions of the manuscript, often done above and beyond her regular departmental duties. The additional secretarial help of Virginia Rhodes and Mary Pat Campbell in the School of Social Work furthered our work. Grace Gibbons-Brown's help in checking references was invaluable. To our colleague Ursula Schwartz we extend thanks for her thoughtful and informed review of the manuscript; her suggestions have strengthened the book immensely. The staff of the Carnegie Mellon and University of Pittsburgh Child Care Centers were also very helpful in sharing their professional insights and experiences, grounding self-esteem in model practices.

The labors of Catherine Martin (age 10), Sarah Martin (age 8), and Kristy Scholl (age 9), in copying, collating, and numbering material during the press of one deadline, were truly lifesavers for this project and the authors.

# Preface

---

**F**ROM INFANCY, WE STRIVE TO MAINTAIN a sense of significance, purpose, and value in our lives. Poets, philosophers, psychologists, and theologians alike have recognized this fundamental human aspiration. Professionals in early childhood education, too, have long accepted our prime responsibility to promote children's inner sense of significance and value. Unlike more objective educational or therapeutic goals, concern about self-esteem turns attention to children's own sense of significance and value. Hence, the goal is not merely to get children to read or act better, but to get them to experience themselves as valuable and competent individuals.

The strength of the idea of self-esteem, however, is rivaled only by its weakness. True, the concept touches the essence of the human spirit. But it is also open to serious misconception and trivialization. Happy-grams, empty praise, smiley-face stickers, "participant" ribbons, and all manner of drivel are lavished upon children under the guise of building their self-esteem. In a culture plagued by self-preoccupation and narcissism, it is hard to know whether pleas for improved self-esteem are a solution or part of the problem.

Most disturbing, perhaps, is the idea that self-esteem is a cure-all. One preschool child was referred to a clinic for language delay, acting out, unsupportive parents, and poor peer relations. The clinicians' treatment plan: Improve the child's low self-esteem. Are we to suppose that this child's sense of self could be transformed without dealing with the complex and depressing realities of his life? All too many interventions aimed at improving self-esteem have been similarly vague and ineffective (Stein, 1988).

Low self-esteem can be viewed as the root of all sorts of social ills—alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, school failure, and unemployment. The state of California even has established a commission on self-esteem in order to alleviate society's ills. While concluding that "self-esteem is the likeliest candidate for a social vaccine" (California Task Force, 1990, p. 4), its comprehensive analysis shows that there is



no single, simple cure. To begin with, they found it essential to distinguish *self-esteem* from *highly individualistic narcissism* by defining it to include not only a sense of self-worth and importance, but also “the character to be accountable for myself and to act responsibly toward others” (p. 1). This definition points to the breadth and complexity of the problem. Beyond esteem in the narrow sense, we are talking about the development of character, values, self-control, and morality! (You think a cure for cancer is difficult?)

Using a broader framework for understanding self-esteem, this monograph pulls together a knowledge base of recent child development research and practice. Going beyond traditional, global measures of self-esteem, new measures offer a more differentiated and integrated picture of self-development. For the first time, objective science is proving the importance and early development of the subjective self, thereby enhancing long-held beliefs of early childhood professionals. These findings are confidence-building! But we also must caution about the need for humility. Self-development is a complex phenomenon that should not be treated lightly. Far be it that we think we have all the answers. Yet, we can chart some clear directions: Guides for teachers, administrators, and professors who are seeking to better understand and promote self-development.

# Contents

---

<i>About the authors</i> . . . . .	v
<i>Source notes</i> . . . . .	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	viii
<i>Preface</i> . . . . .	xi
<b>Part I. Beyond self-esteem: How young children develop a sense of value</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction. What is self-esteem?</b> . . . . .	<b>3</b>
Intuitions and beyond . . . . .	3
The new wave of research and practice . . . . .	5
Values . . . . .	8
How does self-esteem develop? . . . . .	8
<b>Chapter 1. Infants and toddlers: Developing and consolidating a sense of self</b> . . . . .	<b>11</b>
Pregnancy . . . . .	11
Birth . . . . .	12
Infancy . . . . .	13
Alternate developmental pathways . . . . .	28
Toddlerhood . . . . .	32
<b>Chapter 2. Preschoolers: Testing and evaluating the self</b> . . . . .	<b>41</b>
Acceptance . . . . .	42
Power and control . . . . .	58
Moral worth . . . . .	60
Efficacy and competence . . . . .	64
<b>Chapter 3. Kindergarten and primary children: Setting new standards for the self</b> . . . . .	<b>67</b>
Competence . . . . .	69
Power . . . . .	79
Acceptance . . . . .	82
Virtue, moral worth . . . . .	84

<b>Part II. Beyond self-esteem: Implications for practitioners .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Introduction. How do adults promote self-esteem?..</b>	<b>91</b>
Adult feedback must be authentic .....	91
Adults and children need goodness of fit .....	93
Scaffolding supports autonomy.....	93
Individuals are different.....	94
Self-esteem is multifaceted .....	94
Children are resilient .....	94
<b>Chapter 4. Infancy and toddlerhood: Caring for children who are developing and consolidating a sense of self.....</b>	<b>97</b>
Early infancy .....	97
4 to 9 months.....	99
9 to 15 months.....	102
15 to 24 months.....	105
2 to 3 years.....	109
<b>Chapter 5. Preschool: Guiding children who are testing and evaluating the self.....</b>	<b>113</b>
Adults coach young children .....	113
Adults establish the environment .....	120
<b>Chapter 6. The kindergarten and primary years: Teaching children who are setting new standards for the self .....</b>	<b>129</b>
Competence .....	130
Power .....	140
Acceptance.....	143
Moral virtue.....	146
Changing the structure of classrooms .....	148
<b>Chapter 7. Summary and implications for policy..</b>	<b>153</b>
Major foundations.....	154
Implications.....	155
Implications for policy and research.....	157
<b>References.....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Other related books by NAEYC.....</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>Other books in NAEYC's monograph series.....</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>Information about NAEYC.....</b>	<b>179</b>

# Part I

---

## **Beyond self-esteem: How young children develop a sense of value**



# Introduction

---

## What is self-esteem?

**S**ELF-ESTEEM IS NOT A WELL-DEFINED CONCEPT. It is, rather, an intuitive notion that has stimulated and variously guided research and practice. As Harter (1983) explains, "In most treatments of the topic, self-esteem is never clearly defined, but merely taken as a given. Presumably, there is some common referent of which we are all intuitively aware" (p. 320). This is not to say that our intuitions are incorrect. They have often served us well, just as they have sometimes led us astray. The task is not to dismiss these intuitions, but to clarify and build upon them.

## Intuitions and beyond

### Intuitions

The concept of self-esteem includes three basic intuitions:

1. How people think and feel about themselves is important.
2. Positive self-concepts and feelings provide the confidence, energy, and optimism to master life's tasks.
3. Self-esteem is promoted by positive self-experiences.

As Rutter (1987) points out, each of these intuitions has proved to be on the right track:

1. A growing body of literature attests to the importance of people's concepts and feelings about themselves.
2. The available evidence suggests that it is protective to have a well-established feeling of one's own worth as a person together with a confidence and conviction that one can cope with life's challenges.
3. The limited evidence suggests that two types of experiences are most influential: secure and harmonious love relationships, and successful accomplishment of tasks important to the individual. (p. 327)



## **Beyond intuition**

Although sending us in the right direction, the concept of self-esteem suffers in being so general. All the many concepts and thoughts people have about themselves are boiled down to a single positive or negative characterization. Hence, too often self-esteem comes to be viewed as a single, fixed entity, rather than a many-sided, dynamic process.

This monograph goes beyond this single-entity notion of self-esteem in several respects.

***Beyond global conceptions.*** Self-esteem is a cover term for many different concepts and feelings about the self. We can conceive of many different parts of ourselves: our bodies, minds, social standing, even our clothes and ancestors which we identify as ours (James, 1890). In turn, our feelings, positive or negative, about these different parts may be of very different kinds. We may feel positive about ourselves in being confident and proud, loved and accepted, powerful and controlled, or good and helpful.

Theorists have commonly distinguished four different dimensions of self-esteem: *acceptance, power and control, moral worth, and competence*. Instead of summarizing across these different dimensions, as was done with traditional measures of self-esteem, it is important to consider how different aspects of self-feeling may be separate or related (see Harter, 1983).

***Beyond dichotomy.*** Self-esteem is often treated as if it is either positive or negative, good or bad. Positive self-esteem is associated with all the good things in life, whereas negative self-esteem is associated with all the bad. Hence, children with positive self-esteem are assumed to be confident, achieving, autonomous, and friendly; whereas children with low self-esteem are presumed to be unsure, incompetent, dependent, and retiring. These are stereotypes. In reality most children and adults fall somewhere in between these polarities. We all have islands of personal strength and vulnerability.

Dichotomous thinking is also evident in the idea that good feelings about the self are always healthy, whereas bad self-feelings are to be avoided. But good feelings about the self can be self-deceptive and narcissistic (excessive pride) just as bad feelings can be constructive and energizing (healthy guilt). Moreover, the most adaptive self-concepts probably arrive from coping experiences in which negative states are transformed into positive ones (Rutter, 1987; Tronick, 1989). Beyond trying to get children to "feel good" about themselves, it is important to consider how children develop an honest, adaptable, balanced sense of self.

***Beyond an isolated entity.*** It is misleading to think of self-esteem as an isolated thing that you get. This is the inoculation theory, as if self-esteem is like a drug that can be given in a single booster shot. Instead, self-esteem must be viewed as a life-long developmental process. How children feel and think about themselves is integrally tied to their physical, social, moral, emotional, cognitive, and personality development.

## **The new wave of research and practice**

Self-esteem is back in. The last time it was in was in the 1950s and 60s with the parents of the *Me* generation and movements toward open schooling and affective education. It went out with back to basics and the materialistic narcissism of the 70s and 80s. But now, in the 90s, self-esteem has again come center stage. In fact, during the time this monograph was being prepared, two major scholarly books were published on the subject (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconellos, 1989; Sternberg & Kolligan, 1990), and we have seen a sudden surge of interest in developing programs to promote self-esteem. This new wave of interest seems promising. Its success, however, will require that we learn from the pitfalls of the past.

Erikson (1950) got things off to a good start in the 50s. Based on clinical insight and brilliant intuitions, Erikson considered self-esteem as a dynamic motivational component of the ego, developing within a psychosocial context. Each phase of his developmental model marked a new interrelated dimension of self-evaluation. *Basic trust* has to do with feelings of *acceptance*, *autonomy* with feelings of *power*, *initiative* and *guilt* with feelings of *moral worth*, and *industry* with feelings of *competence*.

Unfortunately, the subtleties of psychodynamic thinking about self-esteem were lost both to the general public and to the science of the day. The concept was seized upon and quickly became dominant, to the exclusion of other equally important qualities of the self, such as character, self-control, and self-understanding. Slogans such as "I like you just the way you are" and "Criticize the behavior not the child" became common sense to a generation of parents who sought to protect their children from the anxieties of social responsibility, while propelling them into material and social pleasures (not a surprising reaction given the overwhelming anxieties and social changes surrounding World War II).

Lacking sophisticated theories and precise measures, scientists developed measures of global self-esteem, such as the Coopersmith and Piers-Harris inventories (Wylie, 1979). Spawning hundreds of studies, these efforts further contributed to the naive idea that self-esteem is a single isolatable entity (Harter, 1983). Moreover, the measures proved to be too

abstract to be of use with young children, leaving the origins and early development of self-esteem explored only retrospectively.

Programmatic efforts to enhance self-esteem suffered from a similar fate. Although some programs were decent, many were misguided and all were inadequately evaluated. Overall, lacking clearly articulated theories, practices, and assessments, these efforts proved to be disappointing (Strein, 1988; Scheirer & Kraut, 1979).

By the 1980s it was clear that research, theory, and practice needed to go beyond self-esteem as it had previously been considered. As Rosenberg (1979) lamented, “we will never understand self-esteem unless we go beyond self-esteem” (p. 288).

The last decade has seen a tremendous change in the breadth and quality of research on the self, in part spearheaded by Harter’s (1983) challenge to consider self-esteem within the broader self-system. Most of this research has gone beyond self-esteem to measure various related notions such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-schemas, and internal working models.

Although it shares many of Erikson’s original assumptions, it is encouraging that the current wave of interest in self-esteem can be built on a broader and more secure foundation of research. This foundation is buttressed by the following general advances in the field of child development.

- **New measures.** Such measures have enabled researchers for the first time to examine the very beginnings of a sense of self in infancy, as well as the self-concepts of young children. These measures provide a welcome window on children’s private world of thoughts and emotions.
- **New perspectives.** Combined with new measures, research in child development has led to major changes in how we view children and their development. One particularly important theme is that children are active participants in their own development. Although this theme is familiar to most professionals, it is particularly important to apply it in the study of self-esteem.

Children are active participants in the development of their sense of self. How children view their *selves* is not simply a mirror of how others view them. Infants come into the world with their own individual characteristics. The self that is experienced will depend upon how these characteristics transact with those of the caregiving environment.

Campbell (1990) details how Jamie, an active infant who cried a lot and was difficult to soothe, grew into a wild, aggressive 3-year-old who was expelled from preschool. Jamie’s temperament was already placing him at risk for feeling uncontrollable, bad, and rejected, which only fueled subsequent ongoing behavioral problems. Difficult or anxious children generally find it harder to become engaged in positive self-experiences.