benefits of the development of self-esteem in children. We need to consider the curriculum in the light of what will prepare youngsters for a rapidly changing world and to encourage their enjoyment in lifelong learning. The Myers-Briggs Jungian type identification is one of many methods available to assist teachers in helping their pupils to learn in the manner most beneficial to the child.

There is now more of an appreciation of the difficulties and pitfalls of parenting. A number of projects and programmes exist such as the Parent Network, which provide ways in which parents can develop their skills and find mutual support.

In increasing numbers people are now consciously working to change their old unsupportive behavioural patterns, to free themselves of old restrictive injunctions and to find the path to happiness and self-fulfilment. Being honest about how we feel about ourselves and our own upbringing can create in us more awareness in our approach to the children in our care.

Making the development of high self-esteem in children a priority in our society might be the most cost effective investment in the future we could make.

Building Self-esteem in Children: The Parent Perspective

Tim Kahn

We all know that parents, who are a child's first teachers, are central in determining the level of their children's self-esteem, and that the parents' own level of self-esteem markedly affects that of their children. Let me illustrate this with a story. As a child Jane remembers constant criticism from her parents. 'My parents had good intentions. They pointed out my mistakes and the error of my ways so that I could learn from them. But I ended up feeling I was no good.' She adds, 'I vowed to be different with my own children.'

Jane's daughter, Sophie, is ten. 'I made a point of praising Sophie, not criticising her, but now her school tells me that she only does her work if her teacher praises her. Sophie needs to be told from the outside how able she is — she has no inner concept of her ability.' Despite outwardly changing the way she relates to her daughter, Jane has unwittingly passed on her own low self-esteem. There is a different surface appearance but the underlying

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script is essentially the same.

Parents tend unconsciously to play out with their children the script that was written for them when they were young, even if they, like Jane, try to be 'opposite' parents. It is widely recognised that parents who abuse their children are themselves likely to have been abused in childhood. Not so widely stated is that children with low self-esteem are likely to have had parents whose self-esteem was also low.

I used to believe, from personal experience, that the way to raise your self-esteem and change old, unuseful patterns of behaviour, including patterns in parenting, was to deal with the unresolved issues from your past, perhaps through counselling or therapy. And the implication of this was that all of us would need to go through counselling or therapy in order to break the cycle of behaviour passed down the generations. However, some ten years ago I was fortunate enough to get involved in support and education groups for parents and my experience quickly taught me that there are simple things one can learn which can start off this process of change. I committed myself to spreading these ideas to the broad mass of people, many of whom are unlikely to go near counselling or therapy but could learn from allied concepts. My starting point was that if parents could be helped to treat their children with greater understanding and respect, then in the process they would learn to have greater understanding and respect for themselves. And once parents realised the importance of understanding and respect for their children, they would be prepared to take painful and challenging steps for their children's sake, because for most parents wanting the best for their children is a powerful motivation.

I try to spread the idea that acknowledging children's feelings is more useful that ignoring or denying them (which most parents do unintentionally, not knowing anything different). If we can acknowledge the underlying feelings behind children's 'naughty' or antisocial behaviour much of that behaviour will diminish or disappear. The child who hits and bites may need to hear an adult say 'You're feeling angry inside' as well as 'I won't let you hurt your friend'. That anger may need to be expressed as screams and tears at the heavens, rather than in blows to the body of another child. It is the healing screams and tears that enable children to change their behaviour, not the punishment of actions that they are unable to control while in the grip of such painful feelings. Similarly, letting children know how we feel without blaming them for those feelings — for example, 'I feel so angry I could scream' — is more likely to encourage them to act considerately than if we say nothing and then shout at our children when they don't take our feelings into account.

I want parents to know about the dangers of labelling — calling their children 'naughty' and 'clever', 'selfish' or 'kind', 'demanding' or 'independent' — and the benefits of describing the deed rather than labelling the doer. The negative labels that parents use when feeling frustrated with their children's behaviour tend to reinforce the very behaviour that they would hope to change. Describing children's behaviour by saying 'You've spilt your drink — here's a cloth' rather than 'You're so clumsy' gives children information to use to correct their behaviour and avoids

the self-fulfilling prophecy — the child who is labelled 'clumsy' will tend to exhibit increasing signs of clumsiness. When parents use labels, children wonder, 'Who am I? Am I me or am I my label?' and the wondering continues for decades, often until the final days of one's life. And we all seem to be weighed down by those labels, whether they are 'positive' or 'negative'. Instead, parents can create the space for their children to find out who they are and to feel good about that person — rather than fighting a self-image they have been handed down from the outside.

Helping parents to learn to really listen to their children and hear the meaning of what they say behind the words, along with talking respectfully to their children in ways that encourage harmony and co-operation rather than conflict and resentment, can dramatically increase a child's self-esteem and reduce tension in the parent-child relationship. Reflecting back children's feelings gives children the space to talk about their concerns if they choose to, whereas a barrage of questions often feels like an interrogation and leads to silence. Asking questions such as: 'Where else could you put your coat?' invites a child to think where to hang up the coat they dropped on the floor rather than the more common 'Don't throw it on the floor' which rarely gets any response and leads to further nagging, irritating both nagger and nagged.

Giving children responsibility for problems that are rightfully theirs, rather than trying to solve everything for them, allows them to grow into responsibility. It also gives parents greater freedom, because they are not constantly running around behind their children sorting out their lives. Encouraging brothers and sisters from an early age to become conflict-resolution experts at home, for example, can greatly reduce parental headaches caused by sibling rivalry and will save parents from getting sucked in to play the policeman or referee in disputes — which is rarely effective, anyway.

Many parents find knowing when and how to set boundaries and how to say 'no' and stick to it the most challenging skills in the parenting tool-kit. Testing the limits is one of the relentless tasks of childhood; it is enough to test the resources of any parent, especially at a time when society's boundaries are constantly shifting and few of us know where we actually stand, let alone our children. But children need those boundaries to feel secure and to help them find out where they end and where others begin.

I believe that these 'skills' work for a number of reasons. They require the parent to step back and think about his/her actions rather than responding with the habit patterns inherited from the past. And in stepping back, and offering their child a different kind of nurturing from the one they received as children, parents can start to do some of the inner change work that helps them break out of their old patterns.

It is the love for and commitment to their children that enables parents to work hard at changing their own behaviour when the unconscious pull to repeat the past is so deep. If parents can learn to create a deeply nurturing environment for their children in which their children's self-esteem can really blossom and flourish, at some deep level they are also doing the same for themselves — because our children are a mirror into our very souls.