



Hampshire  
County Council

Virtual School

# The development of a positive sense of self: supportive strategies and interventions

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## PEP toolkit: sense of self

### Introduction

#### What is a sense of self?

There is some confusion about the key terms **sense of self**, **self-concept**, **ideal self**, **self-esteem** and **global self-esteem** and they are used interchangeably.

#### Box 1: self-concept definitions

**Self-concept:** perception a child has of themselves, such as I am a pupil. I am a LAC

**Ideal self:** what or who you would like to be?

**Self-esteem:** evaluation of the above. How important is your self-concept and your ideal self? How closely aligned are they?

**Global self-esteem:** feelings of negativity about your abilities and self-concept in all areas (often linked to depression).

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#### Indicators of children and young people with a negative self-concept

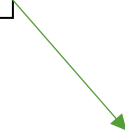
For example:

- exploding into rage if thwarted
- hypersensitive to criticism (or learning feedback resulting in task avoidance)
- spoils the achievements of others
- reacting defensively under perceived 'threat' (the way someone may have looked at them)
- imagining others are against them (personalisation of feedback/comments)
- difficulty taking responsibility (blaming others, denying, making excuses, projecting behaviour onto others)
- appear listless, lacking in motivation
- difficulty accepting disapproval/praise
- difficulty relating to things they are good at
- negative body image
- high levels of anxiety in the classroom (including controlling behaviours)
- difficulty asking for help or not knowing things/overly dependent on others to help them
- people pleasing (fawning and flocking – linked to fight/flight/freeze)
- toxic shame



**LOW SELF ESTEEM**

Strong feelings of inadequacy and blame  
 Don't believe they are capable or lovable  
**May engage in criticising others to feel better about themselves**  
**May hurt others physically**  
**May harm themselves. For example, through eating disorders or other kinds of physical self-harm**  
**May be excessive worriers**  
**May often seem to be unhappy**



**If I keep Quiet, maybe no one will notice me at all**

**Withdrawn**

**Quiet**

**Shy**

**Afraid to talk about their ideas in case they get it wrong**

**I'll show them how much I'm worth**

**Show off, boast, and brag about achievements**

**Loud and arrogant**

**Disruptive**

**Need to be first**

**Often this means that others may look at them and think that they're not suffering from low self-esteem when, in fact, these behaviours are an attempt to overcome insecurity and the need to prove oneself to others**

**If everyone likes me and shows me approval, I must be ok**

**How others treat me determines how much I'm worth**

**Constantly seeking approval and reassurance from others**

**Smiling people pleasers**

**Over compliance**

**Easily led**

**How I perform determines how much I'm worth**

**Rigid, authoritarian perfectionist, critical of others around them**

**Driven**

**Obsessional**

**If I don't succeed, if I'm not the best at everything I do, then I am nothing**

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## Strategies and interventions

### Use of praise with care-experienced children

We may know that adults are responsible for the pupil's experiences, but the pupil is likely to feel that they themselves bear the responsibility. We may feel that **praising the pupil will help to make them feel more positive about themselves**, while the **pupil may view praise as a threat to their sense of self. Furthermore, praise for pupils who have been sexually abused may be linked with harrowing memories** (Allen, 2008). The fact that many of these pupils find it very hard to accept praise or to be reprimanded is, therefore, easily understood. They desperately need praise to build up their self-esteem, especially when their inappropriate behaviours lead to the necessity of reprimands, yet this needs to be done in a way the pupil can tolerate and manage. Both praise and reprimands need to be handled carefully. Please see the following for ideas, but always be sensitive to the background of the child/young person when choosing the most appropriate intervention.

### General approaches

For example:

- daily focus on the positive aspects of the children's day. **Evidence suggests that if this activity is completed consistently for two weeks, a person is more likely to be attuned to the positive things that happen in their day-to-day lives.**
- focus on small steps and celebrations on a daily basis. As a class, activities emphasising the importance of making mistakes and learning from them are essential.

- consider how feedback is given after tasks. It is important to provide **feedback that focuses on the effort put into something, not the outcome. Praise the strategy used** rather than the end product of learning
- praise should be subtle and specific. Adults should **avoid over-inflated praise such as “Wow, your work is brilliant!”**
- **valuing attempts that students make, but not in an over the top manner**, particularly for students who have experienced toxic shame. This needs to be done discreetly and can often involve a mere look or comment
- providing students **with helper roles from which their commitment and contribution are valued**. Allowing students to make choices and be responsible in the learning context.
- **developing personal records of success**, such as a personal coat of arms.
- **avoiding comparisons** that can be damaging to individuals.
- **teaching the skills for emotional literacy** to foster self-awareness and self-concept
- **building positive relationships with both peers and adults in the school community**
- develop a **personal success book**
- ask pupils to imagine a **special and happy place. Ask them to draw/write about it**
- **ask the pupil to write or draw a story in which they are the hero/heroine, and all ends well**. Your pupil could write or draw about all the people that matter to them, and why they matter
- the pupil draws a **personal coat of arms** and writes/draws in some of their unique qualities and skills
- **produce a special treasure chest** with examples of special events:
  - memories, successes. **Ask pupils to imagine burying treasure (representing their special qualities) and retrieving it while navigating obstacles and assistance in a fictional land**. Each pupil

creates a map showing the location of the buried treasure and the obstacles they must overcome to reach it. How they get there can be a game in problem-solving.

- developing your relationship with the pupil through:
  - **listening to them**
  - **spending time with them**
  - **encouraging their efforts and praising their successes**
- **establish in pupils a sense of personal identity:** what are their likes/dislikes in food, music, TV, books, etc. Help them see their uniqueness and right to be who they are.
- **review the pupil's life, key events and key people. Produce a family history lifeline with happy events.**
- **detail pupils' strengths and interests.**
- discuss with pupils a target they would like to achieve, consider **appropriate strategies with them, and support them in working out an action plan step by step to ensure success.**
- encourage pupils to join only **those clubs and activities where they have the necessary skills.**
- give **frequent informal chats to listen to pupils' progress and boost their efforts.**
- **ask pupils to help another pupil in areas where they have strengths.**
- promote positive thinking. Get pupils to list the positive aspects of themselves
  - **One thing I like about myself is ...**
  - **My successes include ...**
  - **My friends like me because ...**

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### **Developing a growth mindset**

All staff and children should practice making mistakes, be encouraged to see these mistakes as a learning opportunity and be praised for the effort involved.

Specific praise for effort and strategy is known as process praise and **helps develop a person's resilience as it teaches a child what to do next time and enables them to feel in control. This type of recognition promotes an internal sense of self-efficacy** (an individual's belief in their capacity). Some examples of growth mindset statements that foster positive self-talk to learning are instead of thinking: **"I'm not good at this", they could try thinking: "I'll use some of the strategies I've learnt."** Instead of **"I cannot do this", they can be encouraged to say: "I cannot do this yet."**

Persevere with the use of technology and alternative ways of recording written information (**talking tins, speech activation software, sticking words in a book, magnetic letters, etc**) to manage fears regarding written work.

### **Developing a positive self-concept: finding hidden treasure activity**

This is a powerful technique that Ioan Rees (2005, as cited in Shotton and Burton, 2012) describes as part of a solution-orientated approach. You have a conversation with the pupils, encouraging them to talk about their hobbies, interests and holidays, in order to discover their skills, strengths and resources.

Ask pupils to imagine burying treasure (representing their special qualities) and retrieving it by navigating obstacles and assistance in a fictional land. Each pupil creates a map showing the location of the buried treasure and the obstacles they must overcome to reach it. How they get there can be a game in problem-solving.



## **Suggested questions to ask the child**

For example:

- I'd like to take the chance to get to know you more, so I'd like to hear about the sort of things you enjoy
- what could you start by telling me? What would you say you are quite good at? It could be at home or school
- who else, apart from me, knows you are good at ...?
- if they were here right now, what else would they tell me about you that would be interesting?
- at the end of the session, give the pupil feedback on all that you have learnt about them and outline the strengths that have been revealed.

Efforts should be made to provide frequent positive experiences that promote positive emotions, relationships, a sense of purpose and feelings of success (such as through personal character strengths). These experiences should not be contingent on meeting goals (rewards). Complete the young person version of the VIA character strengths survey: <https://www.viacharacter.org/>. Place these strengths on something the child relates to, like an animal or a character in a book or on TV.

To support children's confidence as learners, creating a celebration book or 'scrapbook of success' to visually record their achievements, including academic success and achievements outside of school can be beneficial

For children with additional SEN needs, the following links are also helpful:

[Self-esteem in people with disabilities | Sunrise Medical](#)

[How to build self-esteem in your special needs child - Special Needs Jungle](#)