COMMENT

How to Raise Children's Self-Esteem?
Comment on Orth and Robins (2022)

Eddie Brummelman
Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam

Since the 1960s, self-esteem has become a cornerstone of Western child-rearing. After reviewing a large body of rigorous longitudinal research, Orth and Robins (2022) conclude that self-esteem brings modest but significant benefits across all ages. However, the authors did not intend to suggest strategies for raising children's self-esteem. The aim of my commentary is to identify such strategies. Without guidance on how to raise children's self-esteem safely and sustainably, well-intentioned strategies, such as inflated praise, may inadvertently undermine self-esteem or even breed narcissism. Instead, interventions should be based on a theoretically informed and empirically supported understanding of the determinants of self-esteem. By targeting these determinants, interventions may be able to raise children's self-esteem *safely* (i.e., without breeding narcissism) and *sustainably* (i.e., leading to lasting improvements in self-esteem and its presumed outcomes). Evaluating these interventions through randomized controlled trials will help build a theory of when and why self-esteem interventions work. Ultimately, this work will provide nuanced and dependable guidance to parents, teachers, and professionals on how to raise children's self-esteem.

Keywords: self-esteem, narcissism, children, parents

Is self-esteem beneficial? For many years, claims of the benefits of self-esteem were based largely on cross-sectional surveys. Understandably, scholars were skeptical. Some even argued that self-esteem is merely an epiphenomenon—a reflection of one's successes, without any power in itself (e.g., Seligman, 1993). Orth and Robins (2022) make a seminal contribution to this debate by showing that self-esteem can benefit individuals. After reviewing a large body of rigorous longitudinal research, they conclude that self-esteem brings modest but significant benefits in a variety of domains, ranging from mental health to educational achievement, across all ages. However, the authors did not intend to suggest strategies for raising children's self-esteem. The aim of my commentary is to identify such strategies, building on our field's growing understanding of the pillars of self-esteem. Doing so, I challenge the intuitively appealing (but often misguided) strategies that have been inspired by the self-esteem movement.

Since the 1960s, self-esteem has become a cornerstone of Western child-rearing (Miller & Cho, 2018). Parents, teachers, and professionals have focused efforts on boosting children's self-esteem, on the assumption that self-esteem would benefit children. This assumption was at the heart of the self-esteem movement. While proponents of the self-esteem movement were right that self-esteem matters, their ideas about how to boost self-esteem were misguided. The idea was, and still is today, that "one of the most common and effective ways to build children's self-esteem is to praise them" (The Center for Parenting Education, 2021). Many interventions use praise as a key component. An American parent said, "Praise is necessary. It is a must. . . . You cannot build up a child's self-esteem without telling them continuously about the good things that they're doing" (Miller & Cho, 2018, p. 64). Even today, parents act on these ideas. When reminded of the importance of self-esteem, parents readily dole out more praise (Ng et al., 2021).

Although it seems intuitive that saying positive things about children will boost their self-esteem, research shows that praise can backfire. For example, in one longitudinal

Eddie Brummelman https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7695-5135

study (Brummelman et al., 2015), parents reported their level of parental overvaluation: their tendency to see their child as more special and entitled than others. Overvaluing parents are known to overclaim their children's knowledge, overestimate their intelligence, and overpraise their achievements. Parental overvaluation predicted increased narcissism (but not self-esteem) in children. In another longitudinal study (Brummelman et al., 2017), parent–child interactions were observed to index parents' inflated praise (e.g., "You did *incredibly* well!"). Parents gave more inflated praise to children with lower self-esteem, probably seeking to raise their self-esteem. However, inflated praise did not predict increased self-esteem in children; rather, it predicted lower self-esteem and higher narcissism. Indeed, when praised excessively, children may learn to evaluate themselves through the eyes of others, which is a fragile basis for healthy self-esteem development. Thus, by lavishing children with praise, parents may inadvertently worsen the problems they seek to prevent.

When it comes to raising children's self-esteem, what seems like common sense may lead us astray. This underscores the need for a theoretically informed and empirically supported understanding of the determinants, or pillars, of self-esteem. Orth and Robins (2022) contend that scholars should distinguish between self-esteem and narcissism—that is, between healthy feelings of worth and unhealthy feelings of superiority. Building on this distinction, the tripartite model of self-regard (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2020) describes the distinct pillars that underlie self-esteem and narcissism, and it identifies the socialization practices that cultivate the development of these pillars. In particular, the model holds that the development of self-esteem without narcissism can be cultivated through realistic feedback (rather than inflated praise), a focus on self-improvement (rather than on outperforming others), and unconditional regard (rather than regard that is conditional on achievements). Over time, these socialization practices are hypothesized to cultivate the pillars of self-esteem: *realism* (i.e., having positive but realistic self-views), *growth* (i.e., striving for self-improvement), and *robustness* (i.e., feeling intrinsically worthy, even in the face of setbacks).

Scholars can use knowledge of the pillars of self-esteem to refine self-esteem interventions and better understand their effects. Although there are several effective self-esteem interventions, they consist of many strategies, and it is often unclear which strategies are effective (Swann et al., 2007). These interventions can be refined to target the pillars of self-esteem. For example, to cultivate growth, interventions can encourage children to reflect on how they have improved themselves over time (e.g., by overcoming challenges and setbacks). In laboratory research, such temporal comparisons have been found to raise children's self-esteem and to shift children from the narcissistic desire for superiority to the intrinsic desire for self-improvement (Gürel et al., 2020).

Thus, by targeting the pillars of self-esteem, interventions can raise children's self-esteem *safely* (i.e., without breeding narcissism) and *sustainably* (i.e., leading to lasting improvements in self-esteem and its presumed outcomes).

A critical mistake of the self-esteem movement was to implement self-esteem interventions without causal evidence of their effectiveness. We should not make the same mistake twice. I agree with Orth and Robins (2022) that self-esteem interventions should not be implemented "until we have more robust knowledge about how self-esteem can be improved on a sustained basis and which interventions are effective for which individuals and in which contexts" (p. 14). Like any other psychological intervention, self-esteem interventions will not be silver bullets; rather, their effects will vary across populations and contexts. By studying this heterogeneity through randomized controlled trials in real-world settings, scholars will be able to build a theory of when and why self-esteem interventions work (Bryan et al., 2021). Ultimately, this will provide nuanced and dependable guidance to parents, teachers, and professionals on how to raise children's self-esteem.

In summary, Orth and Robins (2022) make an important contribution by demonstrating the benefits of self-esteem, but they did not address how self-esteem can be raised. What the failure of the self-esteem movement teaches us is that well-intentioned but poorly informed attempts to raise self-esteem can backfire. Our field's understanding of self-esteem can advance by developing and rigorously evaluating interventions that target the pillars of self-esteem.

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