



How to help children develop and improve their self-esteem

- Create a warm, friendly non-judgemental atmosphere that provides a feeling of safety, fun and adventure.
- Use children's names so they feel 'seen'. People with low self-esteem often up 'disappearing' in a group. A forest school name helps a child to express their individuality.
- Create clear boundaries by designing an Agreement with the children about what is acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour in Forest School. Use this process to discuss risk and safety, social relationships and any emotional reasoning for the decisions you jointly make.
- Give easily achievable tasks with support (without doing it for them!) to help them to succeed. Create the task with a child's abilities in mind to ensure setting them up to succeed.
- Encourage, acknowledge, guide and listen to them. Child-led learning means they sometimes follow their own path of reasoning. Acknowledge them when they have achieved something they set out to do.
- Ask questions rather than give them answers to help ignite their innate curiosity and desire to learn and explore new things. Listen closely to their answers - show your interest and ask questions that will get them looking further and wider.
- People with low self-esteem often have very quiet voices. Be patient, children sometimes need a lot of time to think - so wait attentively and listen very closely.
- Get involved in what they're doing so they see that adults can be happy in the outdoors too.
- Ensure that the responses you give, both verbal and non-verbal, help young people to feel respected and value.
- Make positive comments and avoid judgemental reactions.
- Do not compare their skills with someone else's.
- Provide opportunities to take safe risks and praise the successful action.

Encouraging a 'growth mindset' (Dr Carol S. Dweck) promotes the understanding to children that your basic qualities can be cultivated through effort. Yes, people differ greatly – in aptitude, talents, interests, or temperaments – but everyone can change and grow through application and experience. In relation to self-esteem believing you can improve, and acknowledging a child's effort and hard work creates resilient adults who can embrace feedback, have the passion for sticking at things, and believe that if they want to, they can achieve and grow, and ultimately feel good about themselves.

"This is a wonderful feature of the growth mindset. You don't have to think you're already great at something to want to do it and to enjoy doing it." – Dweck

The growth mindset doesn't care about being superior. In fact, the success of others can be inspiring and a source for learning, whereas a fixed mindset sees the success of others as a threat.

Emotional Intelligence

Recent developments in the field of neuroscience have helped educators recognise and appreciate the opportunities for neural development that take place in the early years. In Forest School we can utilise this understanding to promote healthy child development on all levels - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

"All emotions are, in essence, impulses to act, the instant plans for handling life that evolution has instilled in us. The very root of the word emotion is motor, the latin verb "to move" plus the prefix "e" - to connote "move away", suggesting that a tendency to act is implicit in every emotion." (Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence, 1994).

The functioning of the brain has an effect on how we process our emotions. The left hemisphere is responsible for language skills such as reading, writing, spelling, verbal memory and analytic reasoning, receptive and expressive speech along with fine motor control. It is often thought of as the 'logical' side of the brain. The right hemisphere is the site of social and emotional interaction and imagination, and it regulates our powerful and enduring feelings. It is often considered the 'creative' side of the brain.

The emotional circuitry that is developed during our formative years sets us up with habitual emotional responses for the rest of our lives. These responses are exhibited in how we handle an emotionally-charged situation. Our genetic heritages also has some part to play in our emotional temperament. And some of our emotional responses stem from learned behaviour through witnessing others and mimicking the significant caregivers of our early years, as well as from our experience of the events in our lives. These set patterns of response may not always be the most effective way of reacting in emotional situations.

The most opportune time to learn healthy emotional lessons for life is during the formative years. If this early opportunity is missed out, learning skills and changing our reactions can still take place later on in life. Established behaviours will take significantly longer to alter before new emotional circuits and habits are developed, but with persistence and commitment change can take place.

Emotional development not only varies from child to child, but there are also differences in the physiology between the genders that need to be taken into account. Boys' brains generally develop more slowly. A lack of cross-connections in the area of the brain that links both hemispheres (corpus callosum) means that some boys may have difficulty expressing themselves, empathising with others and solving conflicts. The slower brain development may also affect their fine motor skills. It is also worth noting that boys have a testosterone surge around the ages of 4, 7 and 12 that may result in them becoming more physical, needing to move around more and possibly behaving more aggressively. Forest School sessions can provide a wonderful outlet for this increased energy and need to be boisterous!

The outdoor setting and a regular, close interaction with nature can bring all children a sense of awe and wonder - leaving them more motivated and enthusiastic about life and learning. It gives them confidence in their physical and mental abilities and takes them closer to becoming content, successful and caring human beings.

Howard Gardner (1997), concluded that exceptional individuals are especially talented at identifying their own strength and weaknesses.