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Self-Esteem Not Always the Antidote to Teens' Problem Behavior

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Madison, Wis.—Conventional wisdom says that building a teenager's self-esteem may help them sidestep some potential rough spots in life, such as drug use or juvenile delinquency. But emerging research over the past decade is now casting doubt on that idea.

"Many drug and alcohol prevention programs make an effort to build self-esteem on the theory that youth who feel good about themselves will have less desire to use alcohol and other drugs," says Stephen Small, human development and family relations specialist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension and director of the UW-Madison Center for Excellence in Family Studies. "However, research over the past ten years has found that having high self-esteem is not necessarily the panacea that it has often been made out to be."

Although low self-esteem and undesirable behavior have often been linked, in most of the findings it is unclear whether self-esteem is a cause or a consequence of the behavior, or the result of something else.

"In fact, many criminals and juvenile delinquents have high self-esteem, especially if they're successful in the criminal or delinquent activities they engage in, and their accomplishments are recognized and reinforced by their peers," says Small.

There is no evidence that teens with low self-esteem are any more likely than their peers with high self-esteem to be sexually active or to become pregnant, though some data suggest that girls with higher self-esteem are slightly more likely to use birth control.

"Overall, there is very little evidence that improving a person's self-image will translate into better behavior," says Small. "While it's usually beneficial to feel positive about oneself, such feelings don't guarantee success."

Parents and teachers may actually cause problems when they give their teens false praise for routine behavior or accomplishments. "Most young people aren't fooled by the suggestion that everyone is special or that everyone is a winner," Small says.

"But," he adds, "this doesn't mean that we shouldn't praise our teens or

acknowledge their accomplishments. Teens need to be encouraged and recognized for their merits—especially by their parents. However, such praise needs to be authentic.”

Research on self-esteem also shows that real self-esteem typically follows—not precedes—real accomplishments. “If we want young people to feel good about themselves, they need to be given real opportunities for success, along with enough training and preparation to succeed,” says Small.

When genuine opportunities for success are provided, young people will have a real reason to feel good about themselves.

“Parents faced with the unique challenges presented by their child’s adolescence, such as knowing how to foster genuine self-esteem, can benefit from new knowledge and learning specific to that age period--as well as support from others experiencing similar issues,” says Rebecca Mather, a UW-Madison graduate student and staff member in the UW Center for Excellence on the Family.

Mather and Small are conducting a study of parents of preteens and teens ages 11-16 who are interested in learning more about raising teenagers. Those who take part in the study will receive a free best-selling parenting book and be asked to respond to a survey about the book and their parenting experience. Some parents will also be asked to take part in a book discussion. To learn more about the project, contact Rebecca Mather at rmather@wisc.edu or call (608) 862-3180.

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