

The Dark Side of Self Esteem

The unintended consequences of too much praise and affirmation

By Michael McQueen

In 1967, a young psychology professor at the University of California named Stanley Coopersmith, was one of the first academics to formally propose that self-esteem was the crucial ingredient for child rearing. Coopersmith's work sparked a shift in the way children were seen – a shift that was to become later known as the self esteem movement.ⁱ



Within a decade, this new approach to educating and raising young people had firmly taken hold. Between the 1970s and 1980s, the number of psychology and education journal articles devoted to self esteem doubled and went on to increase a further 52% during the 1990s.ⁱⁱ

This trend was also being seen in society more broadly. In the early 1980s, the attitude towards the role and place of children shifted from 'children should be seen and not heard' to 'children are to be prized, protected and above all else pampered'. From birth, children were bombarded with the message that they were 'special', 'magnificent', 'unique', 'wonderful' and set to 'be a leader'.

During this time too, competition became a dirty word in schools - everyone in the athletics race began getting a prize, test scores were inflated, and report cards couched with positive language lest the student's self esteem become dented by negative or constructive feedback.

In fairness, such a shift away from the sometimes harsh and stern approaches used by parents and teachers in previous eras did represent a very positive step. However, I would argue that the pendulum has swung too far and that the self esteem movement has had some unintended consequences - a dark side - which cannot be ignored.

The 5 Shadows of Self Esteem

1. Depression

Because so much of the focus of the self-esteem movement has been on the way a student *feels* about themselves and life (rather than what a child *does*), Martin Seligman suggests that parents and teachers have made this generation of children more vulnerable to depression.ⁱⁱⁱ

After all, feelings and emotions are intangible and subjective. Furthermore they can be fleeting which can result in a profound sense of helplessness or lack of control.

2. Narcissism

Lillian Katz, a professor in early childhood development education at the University of Illinois suggests that "many of the practices advocated in pursuit of high self esteem may instead inadvertently develop narcissism in the form of excessive preoccupation with oneself."^{iv}

As evidence of this trend, the number of university or college students who rate 'high' on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) has increased by almost 70% between 1987 and 2006.^v



3. Dependence

By far the most common complaint I hear from employers and managers of Gen Y is that this young group seem to need to be affirmed for everything they do! *'Why do we have to congratulate Gen Y for simply turning up to work?'* I am often asked by frustrated bosses.

In contrast with older generations, Gen Y tend to crave external affirmation for their performance, development and effort. In one recent study, 60% of Gen Y employees reported wanting to receive feedback from their managers on a daily basis and 35% wanted feedback multiple times a day.^{vi}

Realizing this, some employers have decided to leverage Gen Y's need for affirmation in order to motivate them. In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, journalist Jeffrey Zaslow cited a scooter store in Texas which now employs a full-time 'celebrations assistant'. The job description for this position includes throwing large amounts of confetti at employees each week, handing out helium balloons and 'randomly showing up at employees desks offering high-fives to acknowledge a job well done'.^{vii}

Such a heavy reliance on external praise and feedback in Gen Y seems to be a key factor in the development of the 'if no-one is going to notice, why bother trying at all' attitude so prevalent in this group. It can also result in them appearing high maintenance for employers who expect their team members to be self directed and internally motivated.

4. Apathy

American author Tim Elmore argues that the emergence of the 'everyone gets a prize' mentality that has emerged in schools actually robs young people of a genuine pride in their achievements along with motivation to strive for excellence and improvement.^{viii}

After all, what's the point of pursuing excellence and striving to win if there is no true competition or reward for effort?

Further still, young people today are anything but naïve. They will quickly learn to ignore or grow suspicious of empty flattery. If they are repeatedly told that everybody is special, they quickly learn that this must mean that no-body is really special at all.

5. Fragility

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the dark side of excessive praise and affirmation is the way young people respond when they receive the opposite of these things. Stories abound of young people simply folding at the knees, dissolving into tears or violently lashing out when criticism or constructive feedback is



given. One teacher recently told me of a student's devastation when she was asked to review her work and do a second draft – 'why do you hate me so much' the student asked.

In contrast with generations who group up in the pre-self esteem era, young people today are less able to separate their performance from their personhood. As a result, any negative feedback is seen as a personal attack.

This final point goes to the heart of the issue: if generations have been raised in the era of self esteem, why does everything seem to come crashing down like a house of cards at the first hint of criticism and negative feedback?

I believe it is because one of the greatest myths of the last three decades is that self esteem can be given or bestowed when it simply cannot. As psychology professor Jean Twenge suggests, true self esteem is an outcome, not a cause.

Let's be clear: you can certainly give encouragement, affirm progress and build confidence in young people. However, true self esteem is always internally driven. If we are to set Gen Y up for long term success, it is critical we foster a healthy sense of self pride in them that is linked to overcoming challenges, pushing the limits of personal achievement and persisting through setbacks.



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To find out more or to purchase one of Michael's books, visit www.TheNexgenGroup.com.



ⁱ Seligman, M 2007, *The Optimistic Child*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, pp. 31, 32

ⁱⁱ Twenge, J 2006, *Generation Me*, Free Press, New York, p. 53.

ⁱⁱⁱ Seligman, M 2007, *The Optimistic Child*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, p. 27

^{iv} Twenge, J 2006, *Generation Me*, Free Press, New York, p. 70.

^v *ibid*, p. 69.

^{vi} Tapscott, D, 2009, *Grown Up Digital*, McGraw Hill, New York, p. 167.

^{vii} Zaslav, J 2007, 'Most-Praised Generation Craves Kudos at the Office.' *Wall Street Journal*, April.

^{viii} Elmore, T 2010, *Generation iY*, Poet Gardener, Atlanta, p. 119.