

Most individuals understand the concept of self-esteem, but do you understand what self-image is? Self-image is a mental picture of yourself, but it also involves how you feel about yourself and your abilities. With the increase of interaction within our digital online world, the idea of one's self-image has increased in awareness and has, potentially, become more important.

## What is self-image?

There are three main parts to a person's self-image:

1. The way a person perceives or thinks of him or herself.
2. The way a person interprets how others perceive or think of him or her.
3. The way a person would like to be or how he or she perceives his or her ideal self.

Personal evaluation of self-image can include many dimensions of one's self:

- Physical – appearance.
- Psychological – personality.
- Intellectual – intelligence.
- Skills - social and technical skills.
- Moral - values and principles.
- Sexual- society's masculine/feminine norms.

## What are the differences between positive and negative self-image?

Positive self-image can include the following:

- Seeing yourself as an attractive and desirable person.
- Having an image of yourself as a smart and intelligent person.
- Seeing a happy, healthy person when you look in the mirror.
- Believing you are at least somewhat close to your ideal version of yourself.
- Thinking that others perceive you as all of the above and you perceiving yourself in this way.

Negative self-image can include the following:

- Seeing yourself as unattractive and undesirable.
- Having an image of yourself as a stupid or unintelligent person.
- Seeing an unhappy, unhealthy person when you look in the mirror.
- Believing you are nowhere near your ideal version of yourself.
- Thinking that others perceive you as all of the above.

## What is an unhealthy self-image?

An unhealthy self-image can be described as distorted and/or low self-image. Having a negative self-image may lead to an unhealthy self-image. Distorted self-image can include the following:

- Comparing your body to others' appearances.
- Seeking surgery.
- Checking in a mirror.
- Avoiding mirrors.
- Skin picking.
- Excessive grooming.
- Depression.
- Sense of worthlessness.
- Isolation.
- Loss of interest in activities.
- Body dysmorphia.
- Avoiding social events.
- Eating disorders.
- Anxiety.
- Persistent feelings of shame.
- Problems at work and school, including disciplinary actions and termination.

## How to Address and Change Self-Image Issues?

Changing the way we think and feel can be hard; there is no quick way to improve one's self-image, but it can be done. Try using the following activity to strengthen your self-image. These can be done alone or as a family.

List 10 Things You Love About Yourself!

- List 5-10 skills you possess.
- List 5 achievements of which you are proud.
- List 3 occasions where you overcame adversity.
- List 5 people who have helped you.
- List 5 people whom you have helped
- List 20 things you appreciate about your life

Appreciation involves understanding how you have benefitted from the good things that have happened to you in your life; realizing these things can make it easier for you to feel grateful and positive about yourself and your life.

## How can the value of self-image be incorporated into your family life?

### Create a Sense of Belonging in Your Family

This is an important feeling you can instill in your child to help him or her build a healthy self-image. To create this important sense of belonging, try using simple inclusive statements like, “We are the Smiths!”. This helps even very young children understand that they have a safe place in their family.

### Invite Values into Your Family

Make value declarations to reinforce the sense of belonging, and help your child understand your family’s most important values. These actions can boost your child’s sense of self.

Turn your statement of inclusion (e.g., “We are the Smiths!”) into a value declaration.

- We are the Smiths, and we are problem solvers!
- We are the Smiths, and we believe community service is important.
- We are proud even though we are quirky.

### Use Value Declarations to Set High Expectations

You can use declarations to set high (but achievable) expectations for your children and your family.

- Saying something like, “Our family dinners are a chance to open up and share with those who love us” or “We have so many things to be grateful for” will help even the youngest children understand what is important to your family and what is expected of them - participate in meaningful family moments and show gratitude for what they have.

### Encourage Your Child to Share

Starting with the toddler years, encourage your child to talk about and share what happened during his or her day.

- Ask if something good happened and what it was.
- Ask if anything funny happened and what it was.
- Ask if anything sad happened and what it was.
- Ask if anything upsetting happened and what it was.
- Ask if anything weird happened and what it was.

Encourage your child to share with you. Allow him or her to talk about friends and situations. Learn and grow together. This activity can lead to many years of positive healthy communication.

## Take the Teachable Moments

Once your child is sharing these sorts of observations with you, take advantage of these situations and use them as teachable moments. For example, if something upsetting or sad happened that day, you could do the following:

- Discuss why the behavior was inappropriate, how the behavior affected the child who was directly involved and the rest of the class, and how your child felt about the situation.
- Discuss how certain behaviors are not consistent with family values.

## Use Descriptive Praise

Help your child learn how to use positive self-talk now and later in life by using descriptive praise. For example, here are some ideas.

- Try to not use generic wording, like “You did well!” Tell your child exactly what he or she did well and why it was good. For example, you might say, “Wow, you wiped down the table without even being asked. That shows initiative. I love it!”
- Using descriptive praise will help your child know what is good behavior and praiseworthy and make him or her feel that being good and praiseworthy are achievable.

## Repeat all of the above on a regular basis

Maintain a child’s positive sense of self and help your child continue to grow in healthy directions.

- Continue to affirm values.
- Reinforce positive behavior choices.
- Help your child differentiate between good and inappropriate or unacceptable behavior.
- Embrace the assistance of other family members and friends who can use similar strategies.

Children and adolescents are exposed to our online world. Teaching and reinforcing positive self-image are critical. Faced with social media, photo shop, camera filters, fake news, and false information online, youth (and adults) can easily slip into a pattern of negative thoughts regarding their self-images. Regular and repeated reinforcement of positive self-image can help young people avoid developing an unhealthy self-image.

Adapted from: <https://www.positivepsychology.com/self-image/>