

# HOW TO DESTROY A CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

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We learn to handle negative comments when we become adults; at that stage negative comments don't seem to bother us that much. While some might argue that criticism is there to help us and improve, some negative comments that we receive from our peers and elders do not point at our mistakes but rather target things about us that we might not be able to change. Some, on the other hand, make us doubt our capabilities. When impressionable children and teenagers are at the receiving end of these remarks, they can leave permanent dents on self-esteem. Listed below are some examples.

## CASUAL COLOURISM

Imagine a situation where a little girl is taken to a wedding ceremony and she meets a distant relative for the first time. So this relative, in the midst of a casual conversation, says, "She looks just like her mother! Except she's not as fair-skinned." That little girl develops a belief that skin colour determines beauty and you have to be "fair" in order to be considered "lovely". With the added onslaught of fairness cream ads, her confidence and self-esteem will continue to shrink as she steps into her teens, unless there is someone to explain why the whole situation is ridiculous. The closest person to me who has gone through such a situation is my 9 year old sister, and I've had to explain the concept of colourism to her and why she shouldn't pay any attention to it. An individual's cognitive capacities mature during mid-childhood when the person develops a general evaluation of oneself. During this delicate phase, children tend to internalise the sentiments behind harsh words. They grow up with feelings of "not being good enough", which in turn hamper their self-confidence during adolescence.

"This issue is a real one but for some reason, people still don't want to accept that. I myself had to face such comments frequently and let's say for a very long time I

didn't see myself as I do now. But then I made some friends who helped me get out of that mindset. I'm grateful for them but this is a social issue and kids continue to get bombarded with negative remarks about the colour of their skin," says Maliha Tasfia\*, 17.

## GOOD FOR NOTHING

Most of us can recall the countless times we have had to hear this statement from our parents, teachers and peers. One might say that such remarks helped them perform better in order to prove themselves worthy, but the case is not the same with everyone. A study shows that lack of warmth and acceptance from close ones makes it more likely for a young individual to base their sense of worth on extrinsic rather than intrinsic factors, which can lead to a drop in self-esteem levels. Instead of passing on detrimental comments such as these, one could use constructive criticism for encouragement.

"I always wanted to be creative and athletic, like the popular kids in school. But I was always a big chicken and all the 'what if's' owned me. What if the ball hits my face? What if my dance makes me look like a fish? What if I trip over in front of everyone?" says Sihinta Shembil, 25, a student at North South University. "I truly think if I had parent supporting extracurricular activities, I could have been great! Whenever I

did badly at school games and activities, they insulted me without even realising it. Their lack of positive encouragement and ongoing put-downs made me believe I was a total loser as a child and as a teen. Now that I'm an adult, I can see my parents are just humans and their actions and words reflect their upbringing and their parents. I am not angry at them.

Nonetheless, it's still something that affects me today and will probably affect me forever," she adds.

## SOCIAL STIGMA

"I never told anyone that my mother divorced my father and raised me on her own

because I believed they would look down on me, like my teachers and neighbours who looked down on me when they found out," says Fahad Ahmed\*, 19. "Somehow not having both parents in my life made me a 'less than decent human being' in their eyes. It did make me feel awful for a while."

It is quite common for a child to feel ashamed after their parents go different ways, according to child psychologists. And when this is stigmatised by people in the society, their emotional and social devel-

opment is easily affected. What we don't sometimes realise is that our day-to-day conduct shape the way the younger ones in our society will act for the rest of their lives. Children who receive ample and balanced social support display healthy levels of self-esteem and few behavioral issues.

## LOOKS

My "small, oriental-looking" eyes or the shape of my nose have always seemed to bother people for some reason. And the fact that these people were "adults" now horrifies me. For a long time, I had a firm belief that only people with big eyes and pointy noses were beautiful, and I used to blame my genes for everything. Now, you should ask, why did I even let myself be bothered with such remarks? My fault, I guess, was that I was just being a naïve child who didn't know better. Negative messages that we encounter are not always necessarily meant to personally attack us, but rather come from a lack of awareness. It might have been a casual "your eyes are so big and beautiful but why does your daughter have such chinky eyes?" for my mother but to a child, those words simply meant "you're ugly".

As we grow up, the stronger among us get over all these negativity, but the world would be a much better place, and we would have more confident, happy individuals without these wounding remarks. It's not humanly possible to escape negativity all the time, but exposing children to it so early in life creates broken people. Awareness is necessary, and it is also important for us to make sure that we are always being encouraging and not only being critical.

*\*Some names were changed at the request of the interviewees.*

References:  
*Self Esteem & Positive Psychology* by Christopher J. Mruk  
*Developmental Psychology: Childhood & Adolescence* by David R. Shaffer and Katherine Kipp

It is easier to  
build up a child  
than it is to repair  
an adult.



SCARS THAT LAST FOR A LIFETIME

