



# THERAPY NEWS

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## Children and Self-Concept

Self-concept is the view one has of one's self, how much value one places on themselves and what one wishes they were really like (Rogers, 1959). Self-esteem and self-concept differ in that self-esteem concerns rapidly-changing thoughts and feelings about one's self, depending on circumstances (an A vs. an F). But self-concept is a *core belief*, much like a person's political or religious stance; it is difficult to change. Parents create the foundation of self-concept for good or ill. After that, in order of importance of influence for elementary-age kids are extended family members and teachers. In the middle and high school years, peers and others continue to shape a child's image of themselves. Riviere (2014) stated that molding a young person's self-image is like making Jell-O. At first the Jell-O is liquid like Kool-Aid. At this stage it is easier to make changes to the recipe by adding ingredients like fruit, marshmallows, etc. But when the Jell-O (and a kid's self-concept) begins

to form, it is increasingly difficult to change as time evolves. To build the foundation of a positive sense of self, it is important for children to get parental approval by their offerings of 'specific praise.' Specific praise means noticing and commenting on what young people *DO explicitly* that is considered a desirable behavior. What it *doesn't* sound like is... "You are SO nice!" But rather, to the elementary-school child, detailed praise should sound like... "Thanks for picking up your sister's socks without being asked." An example of praise for a middle or high schooler may be ... "I appreciate your cleaning the kitchen and deciding to scrub the cabinets down, as well." These types of comments are referred to as using positive, rather than, negative reinforcement. The idea is to 'catch kids being good' instead of catching them being bad and calling attention to it. Kids are like puzzles with various pieces of self-concept fitting together.



### Recipe for Positive Self-Image

One Cup Specific Praise  
One Cup Positive Reinforcement  
One Tsp Fair Rules/Punishment  
One Gallon of Consistency  
One Gallon of Saying "NO"  
One Entire Carton of Love  
*Repeat ingredients until layers have set into a good self-concept*

Children may view themselves as many different pieces of 'bad' if they only hear parents say, "You are mean, lazy, rude, stupid or annoying." At a later time when the parents try to praise them, the kids will throw the positive piece of the puzzle out; it just doesn't fit. They are rejecting the 'good' piece, as it isn't congruent with the big picture of the 'bad' puzzle of self-imagery previously established. That is the reason why children's improved behaviors only last for a few days, as they return to the overall, more fitting concept of being a bad kid. When a young person has a good self-

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### Parenting Styles

- **Authoritative Style:** The parents are rulers of the house that make the rules, set the punishment and the kids obey those rules. The problem is the rigid set-up lends itself to less affection and communication. Kids don't get a say in making the rules and may view their parents as distant.
- **Permissive Style:** No one is really in charge. There is usually a great deal of love and affection. The problem is a lack of rules where kids may not learn how to abide by them as they grow older leading to problems with authority figures in the school and work place.
- **Democratic Style:** Parents treat children as equals, but with fair and reasonable limits discussed ahead of time. Kids are involved in setting their own consequences and can learn critical thinking skills with experience.

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## Resources

Faber, A. (2012). *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk*. New York: Scribner

Riviere, S. (2014). *Play therapy techniques for school age kids*. Kentucky Association for Play Therapy Annual Conference. Louisville, KY.

Rogers, C. (1959). A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships as Developed in the Client-Centered Framework. In (ed.) S. Koch, *Psychology: A Study of a Science. Vol 3: Formulations of the Person and the Social Context*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Ryan, B. (2012). *Democratic parenting: Evolving beyond authoritarian and permissive parenting*. [www.Parentlearningclub.com](http://www.Parentlearningclub.com)

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*Summer Afternoon, Summer Afternoon;  
to me those have always been the two most beautiful words  
in the English language ~ Henry James*

concept, they are more apt to *own* their bad behaviors and attribute mistakes to something they did themselves (Internal Locus of Control). This way, they have more of an option to change the behavior, as they see themselves as possessing the internal power to control it. But with a poorer sense of self, they can't *own* the behavior or attribute it to themselves, as they spin it onto some outward event or person for the cause of problems (External Locus of Control). If kids have no personal power to change their behaviors, the ego says that the problem has to belong to peripheral reasons or persons.

## Child Management Considerations

Keep in mind, the concept of a positive self-image is important if tempered along with reasonable rules, fair consequences that fit the crime with time limits and opportunities to redeem themselves after a transgression. Telling kids "NO" is important: 1) To help kids care about others to learn that they are not the only ones on the earth, and they can't do anything they want in order to diminish their becoming self-centered. 2) To learn how to delay gratification and be more patient. 3) To learn rules to show them about social skills of sharing and fairness. 4) To learn that trust is earned through doing what you say you will do (consistency). 5) To help develop routines to establish how they know what they are supposed to be doing. Reinforcing kids to try to 'do better' helps them to rehearse what it

feels like to put forth efforts to improve. Rules should be discussed *ahead of time* with young people in the family, explaining why the rules are in place and their benefits. Family and child studies have shown that the democratic parenting style *generally (but not in all cases)* works best when each member of the family is respected and treated equally. Everyone is to have a voice (appropriately) in working towards the family good. The adult roles are seen as managerial in making sure rules are consistently enforced. If no one is in charge and rules go unenforced, kids don't think they have to follow them. Or they begin to 'take charge' by seizing too much power in the home (Permissive parenting style). Democratic parenting stresses CHOICES so kids can learn that the decisions they make have an equal consequence with positive or negative results. This encourages critical thinking skills that benefit young people throughout their lives. Developing children can learn to base their decisions on REASONING rather than on FEAR, as when a child is just simply afraid of getting caught instead of learning how to avoid an unwanted behavior (Authoritative parenting style).

No parenting style is without its struggles, but with commitment, consistency, communication and united parenting, a child's positive development will be the end reward for everyone.