

## LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

Dear Pastor,

*I have a problem that maybe you could answer. We have two boys, ages 11 and 13. I have made some wrong choices with the thirteen-year old. He has a very low self-esteem. I want to change my ways with him, if possible. My problem is this: I gave him instructions not to wear his old shoes any more, for they were not good for his feet. But he slipped them on anyway. He would have gotten away with it if it were not for the younger brother saying, "You're not supposed to wear them." I was in the next room and heard the remark. I went in and scolded my older son for his disobedience. Am I making his self-esteem worse by scolding him when the younger reinforces my command? I find this situation happening a lot. Is the younger at fault also? Could you give me advice on this situation? My older boy with the low self-esteem is the source of the problem, and I feel I have caused it. When he was young we decided to educate our children in a Christian environment. I started him in a preschool program at age five. I tried to teach him to read from about age 6 up. He did not do well and I was always frustrated and angry with him. Sometimes I would lash out at him with my hand. I know I was very wrong in responding the way I did. Now he has no desire for school. My relationship with him is not the greatest. He has a love for flowers, and I am trying to tie strings with him in that area. My younger son always seems to "out do" him in obedience and schoolwork. I need help and advice if possible.*

*Love in Christ, A Mother.*

### **ANSWER:**

You have confessed that you erred in demanding too much of your son too early, and now that the damage is obvious you would like to undo the harm. Your conclusion is that your son now thinks of himself as inferior. The example you gave concerning the worn out shoes— hardly significant in itself—is no doubt just representative of many similar conflicts.

You have been brave and honest in seeing your error, and you are humble enough to seek a solution. It is quite apparent that you love your children and are willing to change yourself to help them. You are half way there. Now that is the last positive thing I will say for a few paragraphs, so bite down and hold on; this is going to hurt just a little— maybe a lot. I address this not only to you but to the thousands of other mothers who are right where you are.

To be sure, your son's condition is serious, but it is readily mendable. The big problem is not the mechanics of your son's condition; it is the state of your own mind and heart. If God could work a change in your heart— not just you, but the entire family— your son would be healed in a matter of days.

You said you "made some wrong choices" by starting too early. The problem is not that you started schooling too early. It is that you applied pressure too early. No, not just too early; you applied pressure that no one should ever be subjected to unless he is in the Marines. The first six or seven years of a child's life is a time of emotional development. It is not a time to feel the responsibilities of academia. The whole idea of Christian education is to keep children in a nurturing atmosphere—to give them specialized one-on-one care. However, if the one giving the special attention is especially critical, the results are especially destructive. Since a young Christian education child is usually confined to just one teacher, and that teacher controls and sets the mood of the limited social world in which the child circulates, the potential for harm is as great as the potential for good.

The problem is not early teaching. Many children are taught to read by four or five, with no emotional damage—quite the opposite. Only one of our kids could read by five. If children are encouraged to participate in the fun of learning, it is never too early. But if you can't make it fun, they will never enjoy learning at any age. If you bring conflict, tension, and criticism into Christian education, you have a certain formula for failure. And not just failure in schooling, but failure in personal development. The younger the child and the more sensitive his nature, the greater the potential for damage.

You honestly described your former attitude and actions by saying, "I was always frustrated and angry with him. Sometimes I would lash out at him with my hand." That's an ugly picture you paint of yourself. And you are not alone, it is all too common. Your letter suggests the rationalization made by all angry people—that you

were caused to be angry. But angry people would not be less angry if the provocation was removed. Pressure blows out the weakest point, but the weak point is not the cause of the pressure. Your son's poor showing in academics did not cause you to be angry. You know you are angry at other times and to other people. Dear Mother, you have personal problems that cause you to fail with your children. I have learned this from thousands of letters, conversations, and e-mails from other mothers just like you. I have the benefit of the mistakes and successes of so many.

Without any claim as a psychic, I will tell you one more thing about yourself. You have a poor relationship to your husband. You do not enjoy him, and you do not allow him to enjoy you. When your other children get older, you will discover problems with them as well—not necessarily a poor self-image, but there will be difficulties in relationships.

You went on to say that even now your “relationship with him is not the greatest.” That's a clear statement that the cause of his condition is not just in the past. Your poor attitude toward him is ongoing. Children are great psychologists. They can feel our pleasure or our criticism. They respond quickly to the signals our souls emit. We cannot hide our feelings. They are revealed in the eyes of our children—eyes that dance with delight and confidence or eyes that droop with self-denigration.

You see the disease in your son and would take steps to cure it. But a family is similar to an organism. It is an indivisible whole. The individual members of a family are integrated like the root, trunk, branches, leaves, and fruit of a plant. You cannot just fix the part that is most bothersome— in your case it is the thirteen-year-old. You must fix the root. Mother and father are the roots of the family tree.

In a healthy plant, mother is grafted into father; mother bears the children; and the children reflect the health of the entire plant. You cannot treat diseased fruit without treating the root, trunk, and branches.

I know I am making you feel miserable, maybe worthless. It's part of the cure. Early child training is mostly just principles and techniques of training, but when a child passes ten or eleven, it is more soul-training-soul than “smart adult with technique training gullible kid.” So I say to you, dear lady, you need to repent— to accept all the blame. You need to discover Christ's forgiveness for your own secret guilt. You need to fear God and love him. And then you must fall in love with your husband; surrender your life to being his helper and lover. With that, your anger will disappear and your son's problems will go away like the night's darkness.

Now, as to some practical suggestions. You are inclined to think that, due to your son's feelings of failure, possibly you should not hold him to the same standards you would another child. You are thinking, “Won't that just make him feel more inferior if I rebuke him?” But then you question your inclination to lighten up on him. You wonder if you should demand less of this broken child. You must understand that placing a child under obligation to observe boundaries and obey rules will not damage his self-esteem. If the child is already damaged, he nonetheless needs discipline and authority. To allow your guilt to induce you to be lenient on a child that has low self-esteem will only heighten his poor self-image by allowing him to act in ways that not only displease you but also violate his own conscience. His conscience makes demands upon him. He has an internal judge accusing him of any failure. You cannot rid a child of the voice of conscience through “positive affirmation.”

If he violates the rules and perceives by your reserved response that you view him as broken, he will do two things. First, he will think of himself as broken and despise himself even more. Second, he will do what any kid does; he will take advantage of your “compassion” by acting the role of victim. He will learn to use your caution and leniency as an avenue to get away with his self-will. You will experience increasing frustration over behavior you excuse on the one hand and condemn on the other, thus provoking you to further anger.

God's unwritten law prevails in your son's heart as it does in the hearts of all sons of Adam. Whether your son is emotionally stable and average in every way, or whether he is psychologically wounded, be assured he is still a person of flesh. As a member of the human race he tends towards laziness, rebellion, stubbornness, self-will, manipulation, dominance, pride, and one hundred other bad words. Here is my caution and warning. Do not make him more crippled with your guilt and self-pity. He must be brought to the rule of law as any child. His soul needs the release that comes from surrender to a higher power. You would have greatly improved his self-image if, when you caught him disobeying, you would have spanked him firmly rather than rebuke him. Although, I must say, a thirteen-year-old boy may be too old for a mother to spank.

The original problem is still there, for, speaking of the present, you said, “My relationship with him is not the greatest.” What happened at five and six has no bearing on your present relationship to your son. It is the present that muddles the present. Children just need three days to one week of smiles and understanding to respond in kind. You son is not broken. He is starved. If you feed him rightly, he will grow.

You said that you were trying to establish a relationship with him by sharing his interest in flowers. That is a good idea. But I want to caution you; if you get involved with him in this project, he is not going to do it the way you think he should. He may let the weeds grow up and leave a mess in the yard. If this happens, make up your mind that you are not going to criticize him? Make him clean it up, but don't nag him until he feels your

rejection. If you have a few good times with him shopping for plants and planning the project, it is not so important that he carry it through, just as long as you do not destroy the memories with unkind criticism.

Finally, I want to address the issue of your son's needs regarding his poor self-image. His self-worth will improve not through words, but through deeds—your deeds of understanding and authority and his deeds of accomplishments. He needs to be steered into a place where he can overcome in any area, where he can be the best at something, where he can be admired by someone he values. This cannot be pretend. He must actually succeed. He knows himself. He must better himself in some area to feel better about himself. It can be sports, model construction, fishing, hunting, wrestling, rope climbing, chess or checkers, mechanics, science, biology, astronomy, weight lifting, boxing, computer repair, carpentry, small engine repair, law mower repair, art, music, etc. Just don't fall into the trap of thinking that pity and caution will restore his soul. And do not allow him to cope by retreating to computer games or long periods of isolation in his room. Don't fuss at him; draw him out into a creative social life.