

Just born with it?

Self-esteem: nature or nurture?

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

Many parenting books will have us parents calling out “Good job!”, “I am so proud of you!” and “Well done!” to our children each time they wobble across monkey bars or present us with their scribble-like artistic masterpieces. Why? At a very basic level positive parenting is aimed at encouraging and developing your child’s sense of self-confidence or self-esteem, as these two intangible personality traits have been touted as more important indicators for success and contentedness than happiness, talent or IQ.

GOT IT OR NOT?

If how your child feels about herself and her abilities – her self-esteem – greatly influences how well she will succeed, it makes perfect parenting sense to do and say anything that will ensure that your child does feel good about herself, right? Well, until recently it was understood that psychological traits such as self-esteem were indeed shaped by parenting and interaction with the environment, such as school and friends. Now it seems that researchers are changing their tune, in particular British behavioural

geneticist Corina Greven and her colleague Robert Plomin, who claim that genes play a dominant role in how a child perceives his own abilities: that we are all genetically predisposed to our level of self-esteem, we are either born with it or we are not.

In a study of more than 3 700 pairs of both identical and fraternal twins, published in the June 2009 issue of *Psychological Science*, these researchers found that a child’s sense of self-confidence and self-esteem is as influenced by genes as IQ is. This claim has thrown social science on its head: for at least thirty years it was assumed

50 PERCENT

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* In an independent UK survey of 237 closer to nature users

that nurture and socialisation were 90 percent responsible for the adult a child becomes. Now, we can only claim with certainty about 50 percent of that responsibility, the other 50 percent lies in your child's genetic inheritance.

CAST IN STONE

Does this mean we can give up on positive parenting? "Absolutely not," says Johannesburg-based counselling psychologist Sarah van Olst. "The philosophy can be more harmful than good. Is there much use in generalising ego strength (self-esteem) and telling your child that she was born with a decreased ability to believe in and feel good about herself? It is just deterministic and unhelpful."

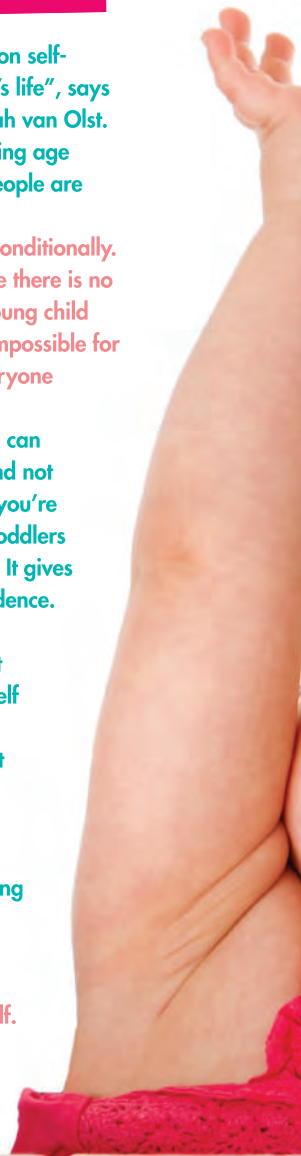
PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

"A healthier way to look at self-esteem is to focus on self-acceptance and acceptance of other people in one's life", says Johannesburg-based counselling psychologist Sarah van Olst. "It may be helpful to use a three-step approach using age appropriate ways of showing your child that all people are different, unique and special."

✓ **Teach your child to accept herself and others unconditionally.** You can explain that all people are special because there is no one else in the world like them. To describe to a young child that "I'm the best me there is," you can say: "It's impossible for people to be better than other people because everyone is different."

✓ **Teach that we don't hurt ourselves or others.** You can say, "Because you are special, you have to help and not hurt yourself. You can show if you remember that you're important by the way you choose to act." Giving toddlers and older children choices works remarkably well. It gives them a sense of freedom and a feeling of independence. You can continue by saying, "If you choose to hurt yourself or other people then you're forgetting that you're all special. Also if you choose to help yourself and other people then you are remembering that you're special. What is special to you? Do you hurt it or help it? Is your toy monkey that you take to bed every night special? Do you hurt it or help it?" Underlying this is teaching the concept that when people help others they also help themselves; hurting others hurts the self, makes one feel bad about oneself and makes one lose positive relationships which result in self-esteem erosion.

✓ **Teach your child that she is responsible for herself.** "Remember that you are special and that you have to see what you do." Communicate that "you are with yourself the whole time" and by the time your young child reaches mid-primary school, explain that she can choose what happens to herself.



It is far better to view your child's self-esteem as a predisposition: the trait is there and like most other inherited traits it can be nurtured. For example, a child may have a natural affinity for music but without having the instruments at hand, the music teacher and the encouragement to practise, that same child may never be able to play the piano.

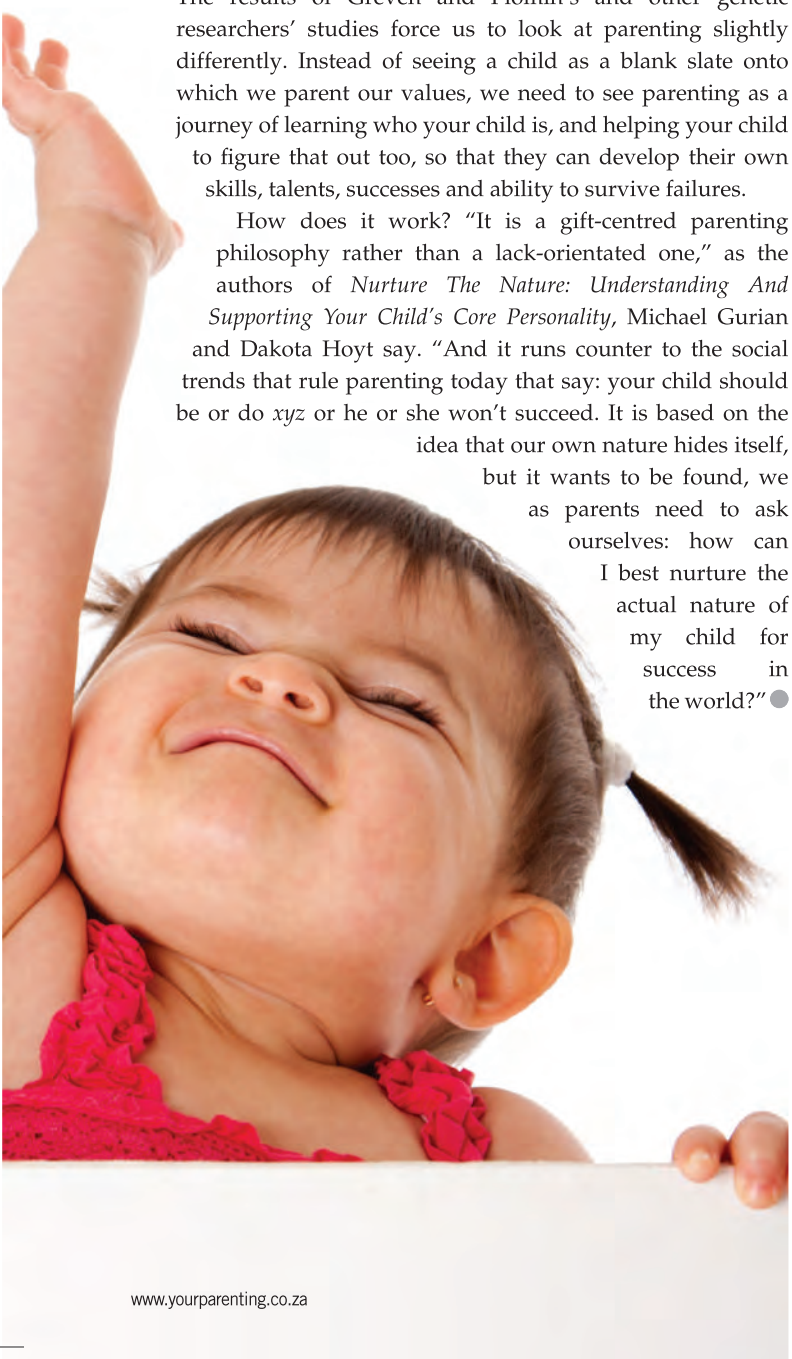
The fact that self-esteem is inherited does not mean that her sense of self-esteem is not changeable, and a parent's role therefore is to simply open the door to allow a child's natural sense of self-esteem to grow. American sports psychologist Dr Jim Taylor asserts that "self-confidence is a psychological skill that can be trained over time through mental exercises such as positive thinking."

NURTURE THE NATURE

The results of Greven and Plomin's and other genetic researchers' studies force us to look at parenting slightly differently. Instead of seeing a child as a blank slate onto which we parent our values, we need to see parenting as a journey of learning who your child is, and helping your child to figure that out too, so that they can develop their own skills, talents, successes and ability to survive failures.

How does it work? "It is a gift-centred parenting philosophy rather than a lack-orientated one," as the authors of *Nurture The Nature: Understanding And Supporting Your Child's Core Personality*, Michael Gurian and Dakota Hoyt say. "And it runs counter to the social trends that rule parenting today that say: your child should be or do xyz or he or she won't succeed. It is based on the

idea that our own nature hides itself, but it wants to be found, we as parents need to ask ourselves: how can I best nurture the actual nature of my child for success in the world?" ●



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