

# Helping Children to Build Self-Esteem

A Photocopiable Activities Book

Second Edition

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Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
London and Philadelphia

First edition published in 2001

This edition published in 2007  
by Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
116 Pentonville Road  
London N1 9JB, UK  
and  
400 Market Street, Suite 400  
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

[www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com)

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Plummer, Deborah.

Helping children to build self-esteem : a photocopiable activities book / Deborah M. Plummer ; illustrations by Alice Harper. -- 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84310-488-9 (pbk.)

1. Self-esteem in children. I. Title.

BF723.S3P58 2007

155.4'182--dc22

2006037059

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84310 488 9

ISBN pdf eBook 978 1 84642 609 4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Printwise (Haverhill) Ltd, Suffolk

# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
INTRODUCTION	9
<b>Part One Theoretical Background</b>	
1 Imagery, Imagework and the Process of Change	13
2 Understanding Self-Esteem	18
3 Working within the School Curriculum	28
4 The Child with Speech and Language Difficulties	32
5 Guidelines for Facilitators	34
<b>Part Two Instructions for Self-Esteem Activities</b>	
I Getting Started (STARS and EMERALDS)	41
II Who Am I? (RUBIES)	51
III Friends and Feelings (SILVER)	60
IV Feeling OK About Being Me (GOLD)	70
V Taking Care of Myself (PEARLS)	75
VI More Than Just Talking (SAPPHIRES)	82
VII Solving Problems (RAINBOWS)	88
VIII Setting Goals (MOONBEAMS)	92
<b>Part Three Activity Worksheets</b>	
I STARS and EMERALDS (Getting Started)	100
II RUBIES (Who Am I?)	110
III SILVER (Friends and Feelings)	125
IV GOLD (Feeling OK About Being Me)	148
V PEARLS (Taking Care of Myself)	160
VI SAPPHIRES (More Than Just Talking)	175

VII RAINBOWS (Solving Problems)	193
VIII MOONBEAMS (Setting Goals)	205
<b>Part Four Working with Parents</b>	
Introduction	221
Session 1: Getting Started	227
Session 2: Foundation Element: Self-Knowledge	235
Session 3: Foundation Elements: Self and Others and Self-Awareness	242
Session 4: Foundation Element: Self-Acceptance	252
Session 5: Foundation Element: Self-Reliance	259
Session 6: Foundation Elements: Self-Expression and Self-Confidence	264
Session 7: Make-believe, Playing Games and Telling Stories	269
Session 8: Course Review and Goals for the Future	273
APPENDIX A: THE ICEBERG OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM	276
APPENDIX B: RELAXATION SCRIPT	277
APPENDIX C: INSTRUCTIONS FOR CALM BREATHING EXERCISE	279
APPENDIX D: CHILDREN'S BOOKS	280
SUBJECT INDEX	281
AUTHOR INDEX	283
ACTIVITIES INDEX	284

## Acknowledgements

Some of the ideas presented here may be familiar to you, as they are based on well-established strategies for promoting self-esteem. However, most have 'developed themselves' either on the spot during therapy or during the preparation and debriefing periods for some of the many children's groups and parent workshops I have facilitated as a speech and language therapist.

My main source of inspiration has been imagework, for which I have Dina Glouberman to thank. Her creative and unique courses, her ongoing support and the support of my fellow imagework practitioners have all been nothing less than magical!

My grateful thanks go to all the children who have tried out these exercises so enthusiastically, to all the parents who have taught me so much (particularly about the realities of trying to fit 'homework' tasks into a busy family schedule!) and to my niece Alice Harper, who patiently redrew all the illustrations for this edition just days before flying off to work in an orphanage in Nepal.

Finally, my thanks to the team at Jessica Kingsley Publishers, particularly commissioning editor Stephen Jones and project editor Lyndsey Dodd.

## Introduction

This is the second edition of what essentially remains a practical resource for helping young children to explore their imaginative abilities and enhance their self-esteem. The theoretical section, although updated and expanded, therefore remains relatively short, providing a framework for the activities and a basis for practitioners who would like to investigate any of these aspects in more depth. Parts Two and Three of the book are devoted to the application of the ideas. The basic format for these sections is unchanged but there are substantial additions to Part Two (Instructions for Self-Esteem Activities) and some alterations to the activity sheets. The activities are child-centred and are based on a combination of therapeutic approaches, in particular imagework (see Chapter 1) and personal construct psychology (e.g. Kelly 1991).

The photocopiable handouts are suitable for children aged 7–11 years and can be used either as a complete course or as a resource to dip into and adapt as needed. This allows for flexibility in how the material is used, enabling therapists, teachers, social workers, counsellors, nurses, psychologists and other professionals to utilise the handouts and activity ideas with individuals and groups in a variety of settings. In my own work I have used the ideas presented here with children who stutter, children who have mild language impairments and children who have no specific speech or language difficulties but who are underachieving at school or have poor social skills.

I have also used many of the ideas in an adapted format for slightly older children. Instead of using the concept of collecting treasure as they complete the worksheets, they are encouraged to view these activities as steps to discovering and developing their 'life skills'. Similarly, instead of using magic and magicians, we talk in terms of the power of their own minds and the sense of control and self-direction they can achieve through understanding the way that they think and how this affects their feelings and actions. The principle remains the same for all ages: active use of the imagination promotes a fuller understanding of self and encourages realistic self-evaluation, creative problem-solving and realistic goal-setting.

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2001 I have been fortunate in being invited to run workshops for a wide variety of students and

professionals. Groups as diverse as therapeutic social workers, family support workers, teachers, speech and language therapists and police officers working with vulnerable witnesses, have all confirmed just how central the issues of self-esteem are seen to be by those who work with children.

Such discussions have also led to the inclusion of a 'working with parents' section in this edition (Part Four). The influence of important adults is obviously a major factor in the building and maintenance of healthy self-esteem in children. We are not born with self-esteem, it is something which develops over time, with its roots in babyhood and its establishment intimately connected with our early experiences. Part Four of this book therefore offers a suggested format for introducing parents to ways of supporting emergent self-esteem or helping children to build self-esteem where there is already an identified difficulty.

Please note that throughout the text when referring to 'a child' the pronouns 'he' and 'she' have been used interchangeably.

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*Part One*

# **Theoretical Background**



## Chapter 1

# Imagery, Imagework and the Process of Change

*This chapter offers a brief explanation of imagework and explores the idea of helping children to utilise their natural imaginative abilities to create positive future choices.*

### What are images?

Images of one sort or another are a natural part of our lives and are our earliest means of making sense of the world. They form the basis of our knowledge about ourselves and others and about our environment long before we are ever able to communicate through words.

Many of our guiding images emerge in infancy and early childhood, at a time when imagery is the dominant mode of thought, and they guide not only our thoughts but our body functioning and our whole way of being. (Glouberman 2003, p.44)

Throughout life we build up a memory bank of images; one which reflects our uniquely personal *interpretations* of our experiences and interactions. While many of these images may be recalled fairly easily, there are countless others which pass into our unconscious minds, stored away in the 'vaults' and yet still capable of informing our daily lives. Sometimes they influence us to such an extent that we may feel as though we have little choice about our feelings, attitudes or actions. Indeed, Carl Jung went so far as to describe the unconscious as 'a living psychic entity which, it seems, is relatively autonomous, behaving as if it were a personality with intentions of its own' (Jung 1990, p.17).

However, he also depicted the unconscious as being far more than just a depository of the past:

Completely new thoughts and creative ideas can present themselves from the unconscious – thoughts that have never been conscious before. They grow up from the dark depths of the mind like a lotus and form a most important part of the subliminal psyche. (Jung 1978, p.25)

The exploration of personal imagery is the basis of many forms of therapy and counselling, since being more aware of how our images affect our thinking and behaviour can help us to make more informed choices in life. The richness and

creativity of the unconscious mind also means that it is possible for us to create new images. These can replace or outweigh those formed through past experiences which are no longer useful for our self-development. This latter aspect is the foundation for the imagework in this book.

## What is imagework?

The term 'imagework' was created by Dr Dina Glouberman to describe a particular way of working with imagery, but the idea of interacting with personal images is not new, of course. The process is centuries old and played an important part in the healing traditions of many ancient cultures.

In the nineteenth century Jung developed the idea of 'active imagination' and encouraged his patients to use it as a self-help tool. Active imagination starts from the premise that the unconscious has its own wisdom so, although the person is participating fully in the process, she allows her imagination to flow where it wants and then works with whatever images arise. The imagination then acts as a 'meeting place' between the conscious and the unconscious mind, a 'common ground where both meet on equal terms and together create a life experience that combines the elements of both' (Johnson 1989, p.140). Johnson suggests that by talking to images and interacting with them in this way in our imagination we will invariably find that 'they tell you things you never consciously knew and express thoughts that you never consciously thought' (Johnson 1989, p.138).

James Hillman advises us to remember that images do not require interpretation (see, for example, 'Imaginal Practice' in Moore 1990). He suggests that we do not need to interpret the images that arise but that the image itself is more important, more inclusive and more complex than what we have to say about it. We need the image, not the explanation, to help us on our path.

In other words, images demand respect not analysis! It is important to remember this when helping children to use their imagination. We can encourage them to talk about their images and to talk *with* their images but we should resist any temptation to offer our own interpretations as to what they might mean. Images are generally very personal to the individual. They should be seen in the context of where, when and how they were created, and in the light of each child's way of viewing the world.

This element of uniqueness in images means that both stored and newly created images come in many forms. Some people can see things clearly in their imagination; others may have a 'sense' of an image rather than a clear picture. Some people have mostly auditory images; others have mostly kinaesthetic (sensation) images. There is no right or wrong way of perceiving an image and even if two people have the same image they may *experience* it very differently.

## Imagework and self-esteem

Children with low self-esteem appear to have very strong patternings of negative images. As I have suggested elsewhere (Plummer 2007) this image patterning contributes to (or perhaps formulates) the 'story' that they tell themselves about who they are.

For example, an image that a child might have of herself failing in one situation interconnects with a myriad other images until she eventually sees herself as 'a person who fails'. In this instance part of her story might be: 'I'm rubbish; I can't do anything as well as the rest of the class. Nobody wants to be friends with me. Everyone thinks I'm stupid...' These images of a 'rubbish', useless person whom nobody likes will inform the way that this child feels, learns and relates to others, not just at the moment of telling herself the story but also in the future, because if she tells the story often enough the images will be imprinted in her unconscious. In this way, even if she has concepts of herself which are not consistent with reality, they are true for her because she *believes* them to be true at a very deep level.

Tragically, many children originally hear and sense such stories from important adults in their lives; this builds and reinforces these negative image patterns from their babyhood and profoundly affects their emergent sense of self from the very start of life.

## Imaginative reconstruing

Is it possible to help a child to alter this negative image patterning? Thankfully, yes, although it will take some creativity on our part as well as a sensitive acceptance of where the child is starting from, and it will be undeniably difficult if her life experiences have been consistently damaging. We should also be aware that there may be a marked time lag before the way that she interacts with others 'catches up' with the new version of her internal story. (Although in some instances, the reverse may be true – a child may learn to behave in certain ways in order to cover up her true sense of low self-worth so that it is the feelings which have to catch up with the behaviour.)

This means that we cannot always rely on observable behaviour alone to give an indication of levels of self-esteem (see p.229–230 and Appendix A). It also points to the fact that adults need to be aware of their vital role in helping children not only to *develop* self-esteem but also to *maintain* healthy self-esteem in the midst of life's challenges and inconsistencies.

There are many approaches to helping children to work with their images in a constructive way. I originally began by using images in the framework of guided journeys or stories, encouraging children to interact with the characters and objects that they met and to create their own images to represent problems, dilemmas and questions (Plummer 1999). It soon became evident that many of the children with whom I worked in this way also benefited from using shorter

imagery exercises and expansion activities to facilitate the transition from internalised images to the practical applications of skills in everyday life (the basis of the activities in this book).

Of course, we can also help children to change their outward behaviour (as in behavioural therapy) or we can help them to change the story that they are telling themselves (cognitive therapy). But whichever approach we use, changes in one dimension are bound to have repercussions in the others – it is not possible to change one aspect alone without influencing the others since they are all intimately connected. So, for example, when a child changes the story that she tells herself, she gradually changes the unconscious images that inform her behaviour and she will begin to act in ways that are congruent with her new thoughts and beliefs.

By providing children with the means to foster creative use of their imaginations we can help them to build a unified sense of their inner and outer worlds; help them to see events, problems and challenges from a different viewpoint and enable them to find the way forward that is most appropriate for their individual needs. The resultant ability to make more informed choices in life will surely lead to a feeling of control, and will contribute to healthy levels of self-esteem, more effective learning and more fulfilling relationships.

If you decide to follow this route with an individual child or a group of children then I am sure that you will find that the strategies become second nature and you will soon be encouraging children to ‘image’ problems, decisions, dilemmas and feelings. You can also *offer* images if it seems appropriate – ‘When you were really angry with Sam just now, I got this image of a tiger that had been hurt. Is that how you felt?’ or ‘This problem seems like a huge lump of rock to me – we just can’t seem to shift it. What could we do about this rock?’ Children who are used to this way of exploring images are often more than willing to put you right and to suggest their own images if they think you haven’t quite grasped the essence of what they are feeling: ‘No, it’s more like a big swampy puddle...!’ Simply talking about images in this way can often enable a child to see solutions or can precipitate a shift in perception where none seemed possible before.

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