

Self-Acceptance in the Education and Counseling of Young People

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The contributors to this chapter all share a common view that central to an understanding of the emotional difficulties of young people as well as their happiness and life satisfaction is “self-acceptance.” We all believe that as a strength of character, self-acceptance provides young people with a way of looking at the world and, in particular, how they consider their own value and self-worth and leads to their emotional regulation, resilience (e.g., Bernard, 2004a; Bernard & Pires, 2006) as well as their willingness to experience life and grow. We recognize the central importance that schools and homes play in supporting the development of children’s self-acceptance. This chapter will focus on the different ways that self-acceptance can be communicated and taught in schools to young people of all ages who may or may not be experiencing problems of adjustment.

We share the view that self-acceptance is a very important strength of character and pillar of emotional health in large part because of the theory of Albert Ellis. Ellis and his colleagues (e.g., Ellis, Wolfe, & Moseley, 1968; Knaus, 1974) have written about the pernicious effects of self-depreciation on the mental health of children and the need for adults to not only combat young people’s tendencies to negatively self-rate, but also to explicitly teach self-acceptance.

Teach children to never rate themselves in terms of their behavior and to separate judgments of their actions from judgments of self-worth. Encourage them to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their *traits* and *behaviors*—both good and bad—without evaluating

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themselves as good or bad. Help combat children's tendencies towards self-downing by reminding them they are made up of many good qualities (and some that are not so helpful) and that they do not lose their good qualities when bad things happen. Explain to children that all human beings are capable and likeable in their unique ways and, therefore, it is good for children to accept themselves unconditionally without having to prove themselves (from Ellis et al., 1968, *How to Raise an Emotionally Healthy, Happy Child*).

In 1968, Albert Ellis founded *The Living School* for elementary-age students at what was then called the Institute for Rational Living (New York City). There, children were not only taught the standard academic curriculum but also *Rational Emotive Education* (Knaus, 1974)—a curriculum of lessons designed to teach emotional literacy including the role of thinking in emotions and behavior and a variety of rational beliefs including high frustration tolerance, acceptance of others, and self-acceptance.

In this chapter, we present a theoretical conception of self-acceptance that is largely grounded in Ellis' views (e.g., 1962/1994). Additionally, we expand Ellis' conception of self to include not only a self-accepting element, but also an appreciative element of who one is. We shall present research that shows the deleterious impact the lack of self-acceptance has on mental health of young people. A new scale *The Child and Adolescent Scale of Positive Self-Regard and Self-Acceptance* (Bernard) Bernard and Ward (2012) shall be presented that measures both negative self-evaluation and positive self-regard and research data that supports the relationship of young people's self-acceptance and self-regard to positive and negative emotional states and life satisfaction. We will discuss how self-acceptance can be taught in classrooms to children of all ages as part of a character or value education program as well as in a preventative, mental health program. We discuss the place for self-acceptance in early childhood education. We describe how mental health practitioners using rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) counseling methods with individuals and groups can challenge self-depreciation of young people and develop their self-acceptance. Finally, we will speak to the important role teachers' understanding and internalization of self-acceptance plays in their efforts to instill self-acceptance in their students.

Defining Self-Acceptance

In some ways, it is easier to illustrate the meaning of self-acceptance by its converse, *self-depreciation* (also referred to as self-downing or negative self-rating). Semantically, self-depreciation involves the mislabeling of one's overall value as a person as worthless, hopeless, or failure. Logically, self-depreciation is seen as a non-sequitur where a conclusion is reached that because one (or more) aspect of one's behavior or traits is bad, therefore, all aspects of oneself are bad. Empirically, self-depreciation results from selective abstraction of one or more aspects of one's negative behavior or traits to arrive at the false conclusion that all aspects of oneself are bad.

The significant role self-depreciation plays in a young person's low self-esteem, hopelessness, and depression is illustrated below using the ABC model of emotions (Ellis, 1994). The bolded type reflects self-rating (from Bernard, 2004b).

Example 1

Activating events: loss of parental love through desertion/abandonment/neglect or death

Beliefs

Inferences (conclusions, predictions): My parent doesn't love me. It's my fault my parent never wants to see me. I cannot do anything to get his/her to love me. I cannot be happy without his/her love. Life is not worth living if I cannot have his/her love.

Absolutes (shoulds, oughts, musts, needs): I need my parent's love.

Evaluations: I cannot bear to live without her love. **This proves how unlovable and hopeless I am.** This is terrible.

Consequence (emotional, behavioral): down, crying, periods of inactivity, avoidance of people and tasks, tiredness, irritability.

Example 2

Activating events: poor school performance

Beliefs

Inferences (conclusions, predictions): I'm not good at any of my schoolwork and never will be. I am hopeless in everything I do.

Absolutes (shoulds, oughts, musts, needs): I should/must achieve in my schoolwork.

Evaluations: It is awful to make mistakes and do so poorly, I really can't stand it. **This proves I am really a total failure.**

Consequence (emotional, behavioral): down, crying, periods of inactivity, avoidance of people and tasks, tiredness, irritability.

Example 3

Activating events: social rejection, teasing, no one to play with, not being invited, loss of boyfriend/girlfriend.

Beliefs

Inferences (conclusions, predictions): Everyone is against me. Everyone is teasing me. No one likes me. I'll never have any friends.

I can't be happy without his/her love or attention.

Absolutes (shoulds, oughts, musts, needs): I need people to like and approve of me.

Evaluations: It is awful to be criticized, laughed at and alone. I can't stand it. **This proves that I really am a hopeless person.**

Consequence (emotional, behavioral): down, crying, periods of inactivity, avoidance of people and tasks, tiredness, irritability.

There are two forms of self-acceptance that Albert Ellis discusses, both of which can be taught to children and adolescents. When self-acceptance is characterized by

semantic precision, logic, and is evidence-based, it can be described as the elegant solution to the problem of self-depreciation and self-rating. “Self-acceptance means that the individual fully and unconditionally accepts herself whether or not she behaves intelligently, correctly or competently and whether or not other people approve, respect, or love her” (Ellis & Bernard, 2006). Simply stated, self-acceptance is the belief that one is a worthy person just because one exists, and despite one’s faults (Walén, Wessler, & DiGiuseppe, 1993). *Unconditional* self-acceptance has been described as the acknowledgement of one’s fallibility and flaws, without rating one’s worth either positively or negatively. USA involves the focus on one’s performance and using this information to decide on future behaviors without getting distracted by thoughts about oneself as a global entity. USA does not mean that one approves of, likes, or ignores one’s flaws and weaknesses (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden, & Backx, 2013). Here, the individual avoids self-rating of one’s value as a person discarding self-labels, over-generalizations, and faulty conclusions about oneself. The individual accepts that all humans are fallible and who inevitably behave and perform imperfectly. Beecher (1988, 2009) discusses how self-acceptance involves detaching one’s self appraisal from what others think:

‘Self Acceptance’ is, simply, acknowledging yourself. It is accepting totally the fact that ‘I am me’ and recognizing that everything about you is a fact. It is realizing inside yourself that this total you is a fact, whether you like different aspects about yourself or not. Self Acceptance is unconditional. When the notion of ‘self esteem’ is replaced with ‘Self Acceptance’, there is no such dependence on others. For Self Acceptance learners rely totally on themselves—‘I can take it in my own hands’—and create their own security. In this inner security they find inner strength. Their potential is released.

Ellis & Bernard (2006) has also written about an inelegant solution to the problem of self-depreciation that involves the individual making an arbitrary but practical definition of self-worth: “I accept myself as good or evaluate myself as good because I exist.” According to Ellis, this proposition while not semantically precise, logical, or scientific, does eliminate negative self-rating and as a consequence has many advantages and few disadvantages in helping people to avoid feelings of worthlessness.

Over the many years of our collective research, clinical practice, and the development of psycho-educational programs for young people of all ages, we continue to advocate for Ellis’ view that parents and teachers had better teach young people not to rate their self-worth on the basis of their achievements or what others think of them and their value as people. We teach young people that everyone is made up of many positive and some not-go-good qualities and that it does not make sense to make overall judgments of their value as people based on their achievements or popularity. We encourage young people to accept themselves no matter what—and to work hard to change and make self-improvement in behavior that are leading to negative consequences for them and others in the short- and long-term. As we shall discuss shortly, it is no easy task for people of any age to shift their mindset from one of self-depreciation to self-acceptance. However, the benefits are substantial especially for those “at risk” young people—who experience low self-esteem and display poor resilience.

More recently, one of the authors (MEB) has begun exploring an aspect of self-acceptance that involves a different cognitive process that can be called positive

self-regard or positive self-appreciation. Self-regard is conceived of as a process whereby the individual is aware of and evaluates aspects of him/herself in a positive manner. While self-regard is an evaluative process, it does not involve an overall evaluation of self-worth. As such, self-regard is not seen as being inconsistent with Ellis' conception of self-acceptance and non-self-rating. Here is the thinking on the benefits of incorporating self-regard within a broader conception of self-acceptance.

Ellis' (1994) conception of self-acceptance as a non-evaluative cognitive process of "self" serves to eliminate many aspects of the negative emotions of depression and anxiety. For example, the adolescent who comes to accept that he is not a failure or totally hopeless when his grades in school are lower than those he and his family desire will as a result feel less miserable. And while this outcome is extremely beneficial, it does not appear that the rational belief of unconditional self-acceptance leads to an increase in positive emotions. Ellis' elegant solution can be seen to be affectively neutral. It is recognized that in time, freed from anxiety and depression, self-acceptance can lead people to discover new pursuits that can bring them greater enjoyment and happiness.

It would seem that self-regard and acceptance of self are complimentary processes that contribute to the reduction of much emotional misery and the experience of positive affectivity. A new conception of self-acceptance as a character strength is, therefore, offered:

Self-acceptance is a distinguishing quality of a person that remains relatively stable across time and situations where young people are (1) self-aware and appreciative of their positive characteristics and developing potentialities (personality, aptitude, family, religious, cultural characteristics) and (2) when negative events occur (lack of success, criticism or rejection by others) or when they engage in negative interpersonal behavior, they continue to be proud of and accepting of themselves unconditionally; they do not rate their value and self-worth negatively.

When young people adopt this mindset, their motivation to change imperfect and "bad" behavior is not to prove to themselves or to others that they are, indeed, good people. Rather, the motivation to change is seen when their behavior leads to the failure to achieve basic goals in life; namely, to be successful, loved and accepted by others, and to be healthy and relatively stress-free.

Current Theoretical Conceptions of Self-Acceptance in Young People

The ability of children to accept themselves despite self-perceived shortcomings and when they are treated badly or rejected by others would appear to develop around the age of seven when children experience a qualitative shift in their reasoning abilities described by Piaget as the concrete operational stage of development (Piaget, 1936). Piaget considered the concrete stage a major turning point in the child's cognitive development, because it marks the beginning of logical or operational thought. The key feature of this stage of cognitive development is

conservation. Conservation is the ability to understand that something stays the same even though its appearance changes. The ability to conserve enables children to understand that how people react to their behavior, and despite not always being successful in learning, their self (who they are) including their value as a person remains the same. *Conservation of self* would appear fundamental to the development of self-acceptance especially if one adopts Ellis' inelegant definition of self-acceptance that has the person accepting that he or she is a worthwhile or good person simply because he or she exists. Kegan (1995) discusses a similar developmental construct when elaborating on the "cross categorical self."

The cognitive immaturity of children younger than seven makes self-acceptance problematic as they are prone to a variety of cognitive errors including personalization, over-generalization, and all- or none thinking (e.g., Bernard & Joyce, 1984). Additionally, given the propensity of humans who experience emotional problems to cognitively process events in their lives in ways characteristic of the pre-concrete operational period of development (e.g., Beck, 1976), it is no wonder that people find self-acceptance an appealing belief but difficult to put into practice.

Ellis' theory of personality development and his proposition that people's emotional adjustment is a function of two, opposing biological tendencies is compelling (Ellis, 1962/1994). He argues that all people have an *irrationality* disposition that characterizes their thoughts, feelings, and actions when infants, and young children and that continues to exert a strong influence over our emotional lives across the life span. The capacity for *rationality* emerges at about the age of seven and develops through learning and life experience enabling the individual to self-manage and emotionally regulate. Ellis has written most extensively about the power of challenging and changing irrational beliefs using more rational, scientific cognitive processes. He also recognized the importance of explicitly teaching rational beliefs such as self-acceptance to all young people in school in the form of psycho-education as well as when counseling individual children who present with low self-esteem, depression, and other issues related to their self-depreciation (Bernard, 2009).

Ellis argued for a largely biological basis for irrationality (including the tendency towards self-depreciation). He proposed that 80 % of irrationality was a function of biological make-up while learning including parenting and education accounted for 20 %. He also argued for significant individual differences in people's tendencies towards irrationality citing as evidence the differences shown in the psychological make-up of siblings growing up in the same family. So, the reason why some young people who experience emotional difficulties have more highly developed cognitive processes for viewing the world in irrational ways may have more to do with their biology than their environment.

Finally, Ellis forcefully argued that self-depreciation was derivative from and secondary to *absolutistic thinking* (Ellis, 1994). Ellis argued that helping eliminate *demands, should, oughts, and musts* from the thinking of young people about achievement and success would have somewhat of a domino effect on other irrational processes such as *awfulizing, I can-stand-it-it is and global rating of self, others, and world*.

Research on Self-Acceptance

From a review of the research, one of the problems we see in understanding the concept of self-acceptance is that it is often defined inconsistently. Further, self-acceptance is also used interchangeably with the concepts of self-worth and self-esteem, making it difficult to truly understand self-acceptance, its relationship to mental health, and ultimately the strategies that may be used to promote this concept.

Research reveals the relationship of low self-acceptance as indicated by a high degree of self-depreciation and childhood disorders (e.g., Ellis & Bernard, 2006). For example, using the *Child and Adolescent Scale of Irrationality to measure self-depreciation*, Bernard and Cronan (1999) found significant positive relationships between self-depreciation, trait anxiety, trait anger, and teacher ratings of student low effort in school and behavior problems. Pannes (1963) found significant associations between low dogmatism in adolescents and low degrees of self-acceptance. Self-acceptance has been shown to be related to both internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Kassay, Terjesen, & Smidt, 2010) as well as academics (Brooks, 1999) among both clinical samples and typically developing youth.

Recently, Bernard designed the *Child and Adolescent Survey of Positive Self-Regard and Self-Acceptance* (see Appendix 1) that contains items reflecting dimensions of positive self-regard as well as negative self-evaluation. In its original form, 12 items were written tapping each dimension and were edited and agreed to by three different experts in rational emotive behavior therapy. The survey was administered to 254 students (169 in grades 5/6; 85 in grades 7/8) in four different schools in Victoria, Australia. An exploratory factor analysis revealed a two-factor solution with eight items being dropped due to item-factor loadings lower than 0.50. The factors were negatively correlated (0.49).

Items loading on Factor 1 “Positive Self-Regard” but not Factor 2 reflect an self-awareness of positive attributes especially when faced with negative events.

- When I think about what I cannot do very well, I still accept who I am.
- When I get a lower grade than I want, I am good at reminding myself I am capable.
- When I look in the mirror and see something I don’t like (for example, my skin, my hair, my nose), I know I still have good things about me.
- I know a lot about my good qualities.

Factor 2 “Negative Self-Evaluation” consists of items that reflect global self-rating as well as the importance of other people’s opinions and school performance as a basis for determining one’s value as a person.

- When my friends don’t ask me to do things with them, I think I’m a loser.
- People would like me a lot more if I wasn’t such a loser.
- When things are boring, I think I’m a dull and uninteresting person.
- I am someone who needs my friends to like me to feel important and to be worthwhile.
- When I don’t succeed in a subject that is important to me, I am likely to think I’m a complete failure.

Table 1 Relationship between self-regard and negative self-evaluation with positive/negative emotions and life satisfaction

	Positive affect	Negative affect	Life satisfaction
Positive self-regard	0.55	-0.22	0.63
Negative self-evaluation	-0.37	0.38	-0.51
Total	0.52	-0.34	0.64

To examine the relationship of positive self-regard and negative self-evaluation to the emotional life and life satisfaction of young people, the revised 16-item *Child and Adolescent Survey of Positive Self-Regard and Self-Acceptance*, *Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (six-item short form), and the 20-item *Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children* (Laurent et al., 1999) were administered to 175 students (90 in grades 5/6; 85 in grades 7/8) in four different schools in Victoria, Australia. Significant relationships are reported in Table 1.

Positive affect correlated 0.58 with Life Satisfaction whereas negative affect correlated -0.53. No gender differences were found and there was some evidence that older students score lower in Factor 1 (positive self-regard) than younger students.

Both dimensions, positive self-regard and negative self-evaluation, were associated with life satisfaction. As might be expected, positive self-regard was most strongly correlated with the experience of positive emotions while negative self-evaluation was most strongly correlated with the experience of negative emotions. Overall, these preliminary findings suggest that education programs for young people should include learning experiences that promote the development of positive self-regard and the elimination of negative self-evaluation.

The research that directly targets the promotion of self-acceptance among youth is somewhat sparse. That is, while it can be assumed that many investigations that utilized Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy as their theoretical approach incorporated some direct instruction in self-acceptance, unfortunately few of them specify as to whether they did, how they did it, and to what degree (Esposito, 2009). While there are a number of programs that clearly have self-acceptance as a cornerstone, the researchers who evaluate the efficacy of these programs would be better served to highlight specifically what components of the program were used to examine their relation to outcome. That is, if we are able to ascertain what part of the program leads to therapeutic change for specific clinical problems, then those areas could be targeted clinically and enhance therapeutic efficacy.

Self-acceptance may also serve as a protective factor to reduce the likelihood of more severe negative outcomes among individuals who have experienced a traumatic event or reduce the likelihood of the development of psychopathology. An example of this is seen in the research by Tanaka, Wekerele, Schmuck, and Paglia-Boak (2011) who examined the relationship among childhood maltreatment and self-compassion among 117 youths receiving services through Child Protective Services (CPS) over the course of 2 years. The authors defined self-compassion as positive acceptance of self and described these youth as a high-risk group and reported a negative correlation between self-compassion and higher childhood emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and physical abuse. Youths with lower self-compassion scores were at increased risk

of experiencing psychological distress, problem alcohol use, and reporting a serious suicide attempt. This research offers many interesting considerations for the role of self-acceptance in child functioning. To begin, there is a relationship with self-compassion/acceptance and childhood abuse, which may be a possible area for the clinician to target in their clinical work with this population. Further, as those with higher self-compassion/acceptance are at less risk for maladaptive functioning, this may serve as a call to implement curricula that address self-acceptance at an earlier point in development as a preventative approach.

The buffering impact of self-acceptance may also be seen in recent research that looked at the development of body dissatisfaction and psychopathology (Maxwell & Cole, 2012). The authors reported that adolescents' use of self-acceptance strategies appeared to attenuate the relation between body dissatisfaction and psychopathology. Now the scales that measured self-acceptance may not be exactly in line with the conceptualization of self-acceptance for this chapter (e.g., "I would say to myself that I am perfect the way I am," "I would tell myself that I like the way I look"); these results may provide insights into healthy and unhealthy strategies that adolescents may use to manage negative affective states and body dissatisfaction, may warrant further investigation, and further support the importance of this concept as a buffer to pathology.

In sum, self-acceptance has been demonstrated to be related to healthy affective states and behavior among youth, and also has been used as a component of varied clinical interventions and educational programs that have resulted in positive outcomes. The combination of the continued efficacy of cognitive-behavioral interventions for youth, with the desire for more preventative programming and efficiency of clinical work may in fact spur further investigation into examining the science of self-acceptance among youth. Researchers would greatly benefit the work of clinicians who work with youth if they more clearly articulated specific treatment procedures and therapeutic strategies and linked these to outcome. We need to consider the generalizability of findings across regions, cultures, and age groups as well as the transportability of self-acceptance-based interventions within contexts in which clinical care is more often to occur (i.e., schools, community mental health centers). More attention to developing specific methodologies that assess self-acceptance and evaluate its impact within these programs or curriculums is warranted. This greater elucidation of the exact role of self-acceptance in reducing the risk of aversive consequences and promoting student social-emotional acceptance will further our knowledge in this area and increase our educational and psychological practices when working with youth.

Classroom Applications

There are a number of ways to teach self-acceptance to a whole class of students (Vernon & Bernard, 2006).

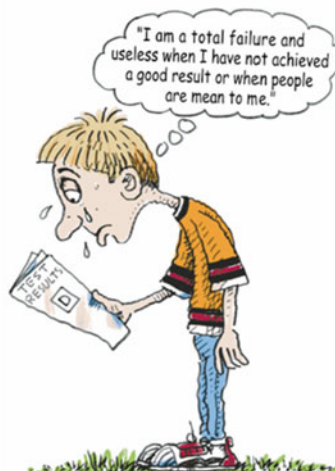
1. Bernard's (2013) recommends in his curricula *I Accept Myself No Matter What* that teachers should "sell" the idea to students that self-acceptance is valuable

and important to their happiness and success (see Appendix 2 “Introducing Self-acceptance to Your Students”).

2. To help encourage the development of positive self-regard, teachers can design activities for students to become more aware of and appreciate their positive qualities including: character strengths (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004), types of multiple intelligence (e.g., Gardner, 2011), family, religious, and cultural background.
3. Once presented with different meanings of the word “self-acceptance,” students should be given the opportunity to develop in their own words what self-acceptance means (see Appendices 3 and 4). They should also be given examples of how self-accepting self-talk can be applied when confronted with different difficult situations (“Happenings”).
4. In discussing the meaning of self-acceptance (accepting myself) (Bernard, 2013), visual reminders that communicate self-acceptance should be displayed in the classroom. Sometimes, when self-depreciation (self-downing) is also being taught, contrasting images can be displayed together.



Accepting Myself



Self-Downing

5. At different teachable moments, teachers should help students to use self-acceptance as a way of thinking when they are faced with teasing, rejection of lower than wished for school performance (“Remember, you are not a ‘D’; person because you received a grade of ‘D’”). The message that teachers can have their students internalize to deal with an act of bullying or teasing is “I am still a worthwhile person” (Bernard, 2012b).
6. Many books written for young people of different ages contain portray characters that display varying degrees of self-acceptance. These stories contain common messages about accepting and celebrating who you are and to be proud of your

differences. Some popular examples of books and stories that can be incorporated in the language arts curriculum. include:

Freddie Flounder: Virginia Waters (Age Level: 8 Years+)

Content:

How to handle making mistakes:

Step 1. Accept yourself *totally*, mistakes and all. Try not to put *yourself* down, no matter what you do. (no self-rating)

Step 2. Accept responsibility for having made mistake or doing something badly

Step 3. Try to correct mistake

Step 4. See what you can do to avoid making mistake in the future

Cool Cat: Ann Vernon (Age Level: 6–7 Years+) (Story Appears in Following Section)

Content:

Accept differences and deficiencies; no overall self-rating.

What I Like About Me: Allia Zobel-Nolan (Age Level: 5 Years+)

Content: Opportunity for children to explore what they like about themselves; we are all different; life is great.

Oliver Onion: The Onion Who Learns to Accept and Be Himself: Dianne Murrell (Age Level: 4–10 Years)

Content: you cannot run away from who you are; celebrate your uniqueness; do not try to be like someone else, you cannot; it's very difficult to be something you are not; "I am an onion and an onion is all I want to be." Every shape and color is wonderful. From now on, he would like and accept himself and not try to change into someone else.

We're Different, We're the Same... and we are all wonderful!: Sesame Street (Age Level: 5 Years+)

Content: We're the same. We're different. That's what makes the world such fun. Many kinds of people, not just one! What makes a rainbow beautiful is that it has every hue; so aren't you glad, you look like you?

It's Okay to Be Different: Todd Parr (Age Level: 5–6 Years)

Content: Its OK to be different. You are special and important because of being who you are ("It's OK to be proud of who you are")

7. A most common classroom practice for teaching self-acceptance is presenting developmentally and culturally appropriate lessons that explicitly teach different aspects of self-acceptance. Activities can be sourced from published curricula such as Bernard's *Program Achieve* (2008), Bernard's *I Accept Myself No Matter What* (2013), Vernon's *Thinking, Feeling, Behaving* (2006), and Sabine Beecher's *Resilience through Self Acceptance Skills* (2009). Bernard and Vernon's curricula include lessons that suit students from lower elementary to upper secondary levels of schooling (see Appendix 5 for samples of lessons).

Self-Acceptance in Early Childhood Education

With the goal of self-acceptance to promote social-emotional development and resiliency, careful consideration on how self-acceptance is taught and integrated into educational curriculums and programs for younger children warrants considerable attention. Further, with increased awareness about the impact of social-emotional learning on child and adolescent outcomes (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010; CASEL, 2005; NASP, 2012; Payton et al., 2008; Zins, Walberg, & Weisberg, 2004) and prevalence rates for mental health problems in pediatric populations (Merikangas et al., 2010), the need to prepare our youth early for the challenges of life is essential (Barrish, 1997, p. 74). The promotion of a child's social-emotional development in educational institutions is not a foreign notion to educators as research has demonstrated relationships between academic performance and social-emotional well-being (Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Zins, Walberg, & Weisberg, 2004) and as policies and regulations (e.g., Dignity for All Students Act, NYSED, 2010) have been created to both encourage and mandate educational institutions to implement programming to improve social-emotional functioning, dignity, tolerance, and respect (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). However, the regular or consistent practice of teaching social-emotional concepts like self-acceptance with younger children is less understood.

The idea of promoting self-acceptance in early childhood education makes logical and practical sense. Early childhood education encompasses a developmental range where children learn through discovery, observation, play, and direct instruction (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Berk, 2010; Bernard, 2004c). It is a time where children are educated in classrooms with other children and adults who may have different experiences and views from their own and from the somewhat homogeneous experiences they may have had at home. Here, they can recognize differences in physical appearances, capabilities, and family demographics. They will also encounter success, difficulties, and failures. Even at very young ages children show displeasure they make a mistake, or rate themselves through comparison with their peers (Barrish, 1997). Promoting self-acceptance in early childhood can also serve as a protective or preventative factor in the development of future mental health problems. Both parents and teachers can teach and encourage the practice of self-acceptance within the child's environment. Therefore, it is important that self-acceptance be taught and promoted in early childhood education.

In light of the unique characteristics of early childhood education, special considerations can be made in the instruction and promotion of self-acceptance within the school environment. In general, when promoting self-acceptance, practitioners would be wise to consider developmental levels in regard to language, materials, and implementation. Having the language used by teachers and staff and within curriculum materials is age-appropriate and culture sensitive will be advantageous. When defining terms like self-acceptance, using a vocabulary that is familiar and comprehensible by young students is key to their recall and application of self-acceptance in their lives. Through preparation, teachers and staff could pre-teach

vocabulary, provide relatable examples, and elicit student's background knowledge and experiences to help make connections within their learning. Similarly, having materials that are engaging and interesting (e.g., illustrated short stories, songs, the use of puppets/dolls, or even the use of technology like computer/smartboards) can all capture and sustain the student's attention and help increase participation (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2009). Second, to enhance student learning within early childhood education, the strategies used to promote self-acceptance should need rehearsal, modeling, and reinforcement in the natural learning environment. Similar to teaching academic concepts, instruction in self-acceptance at younger ages needs to be direct and specific and involve many diverse examples that are relevant to the children's experiences and opportunities to practice these concepts offered. Further, concepts taught through direct instruction should also be highlighted and used throughout the day and not in isolation, increasing generalizability of these skills into real life. As situations in school arise, teachers and staff can use as teachable moments. These situations during the school day can allow for the practice and reinforcement of skills as well as assisting the students cope with the situation. For example, if a student made an error on their art project and begins to cry, the teacher could help the child cope with the situation of making a mistake and rehearse self-statements such as "We all make mistakes, but just because we made a mistake does not mean that we are bad." Additionally, if a student becomes upset due to a physical impairment, rehearsing self-acceptance statements could include, "I don't like that I need hearing aids, but it doesn't make me less special and it's not going to stop me from coming to school."

Students of all ages but particularly young children learn through observation and reinforcement. One of the keys to teaching and promoting self-acceptance lies with working with key players (i.e., parents, teachers, and staff). Therefore, teachers, parents, and staff are recommended to model self-acceptance within themselves and with one another. As parents and early childhood educators have a large impact on child behavior, it seems vital for both parents and teachers to receive education and resources to further help their children. Thus, many of these curriculums for early childhood education have a parent component that provides parents with psycho-education and strategies (Bernard, 2003). Particularly, parent and teachers also need to learn about self-acceptance and about strategies to teach and reinforce the concept of self-acceptance in younger children. It is also important to reinforce and acknowledge their student's competence and achievement (Barrish & Barrish, 1989) while emphasizing the idea that when negative events occur, children do not rate themselves in a negative fashion. In addition, many educators design and use classroom rules or classroom management systems in their classes. The reinforcement of students for both peer and self-acceptance can easily be incorporated into their management systems.

Self-acceptance is also described or listed in other curriculums as self-awareness is a key component in many social-emotional curriculums for elementary-aged populations. Regrettably, despite the aforementioned importance of setting patterns within the early years, there are far less curriculums for children younger than the age of kindergarten (CASEL, 2005). These curriculums targeting self-acceptance/

self-awareness in young children has been developed for implementation in several settings, including classrooms, groups, or individual formats. Children are taught the idea of self-acceptance through lessons that may involve stories, activities, or content that illustrates how one can practice self-acceptance (Bernard, 2003; Vernon, 2006). Many of these lessons with younger children also involve the rehearsal of self-statements. This appears to be particularly useful for young children as they may lack the vocabulary to develop these statements independently. Examples of self-accepting statements include, “Even when I did something wrong, I am still an important person” or “I am special because of who I am, not just because of how I did on this test” (Barrish, 1997), “Our differences make us special.” It is important that the rehearsal and use of these statements are reinforced and practiced within the real-life settings.

Individual Counseling

It is not at all uncommon for children and adolescents to struggle with self-acceptance. We live in a world that places so much emphasis on winning or losing, and young people are conditioned at a very young age that it is best to be a “winner.” However, this type of dichotomous thinking can be very detrimental and as mental health and school counseling practitioners, we have an important role to play in helping them accept themselves.

In teaching a young person self-acceptance, a prerequisite step often involves the disputing of self-depreciation. You can explain that disputing involves asking three questions about one’s thinking:

1. Is what I am thinking true? Is there evidence to support what I am thinking?
2. Is my thinking logical? Does it make sense to think this way?
3. Does it help me to think this way? Does my thought help me to achieve my goals and manage my emotions?

When a young person answers “No” to any one of these questions, he/she should with your help try to change the thought to one that is true, sensible, and helpful.

To dispute self-downing, you will want to show young clients how their thinking “I’m hopeless, a loser” does not make sense and is not true. You can begin by having the young person identify a range of positive and negative traits using a self-concept circle divided into segments with pluses and minuses in each segment. Once completed, ask young client “Does it make sense to think because something bad happened (e.g., poor grade, teased, rejection) that you are totally bad?” “Do you lose all your positive qualities when you make something bad happen?” You can also discuss the concept of human fallibility. Indicate that everyone is born as a mistake maker and, as such, it never makes sense to think, “I must not make mistakes” as mistakes are inevitable.

You can ask a young client: “Would you put a friend of yours down because she didn’t do well in a subject or wasn’t invited to a party? Would it make sense to think that she was a total loser?” Once the young person agrees that it wouldn’t make

sense to think that way, you can ask: “Well then, why are you putting yourself down because of what happened. If you would not put your friend down, does it make sense to put yourself down?”

An analogy can be used to dispute self-depreciation. Ask: “Would you trash a car if it had a flat tire?” When the young person can see that it would not make sense to do so, you can help him/her begin to see that trashing himself when something bad happens does not make sense.

An example of semantic disputation of self-depreciation is seen in the following exchange between a therapist and young client.

T: So, let me get this straight. When, you were not invited to the party at Mary’s house and your friend was, you thought of yourself as a “loser.” Is that what you thought?

C: Yeah, I mean like Dina and Stephanie were invited.

T: Well, I would upset myself about what happened, too. But, if you don’t want to get so down, let’s examine what you were telling yourself and see if it is rational.

C: OK.

T: When you think of yourself as a loser, the word “loser” means more than “I am not popular enough with Mary to get invited to her party.”

The word “loser” means loser in everything you have done, are doing, and will be doing. It means your total essence is one of being a loser. Now, is your use of the word “loser” really true to this meaning?

The following ideas can be taught to help engender both self-acceptance and other-acceptance: “(1) Every person is complex, not simple, (2) I am complex, not simple, (3) Every person is made up of many positive and negative qualities, (4) I am made up of many positive and negative qualities, (5) A person is not all good or all bad because of some of his or her characteristics, (6) I am not all good or all bad, (7) When I only focus on the negative characteristics of a person, I feel worse about the person, (8) When I only focus on my negative qualities, I feel worse about myself, (9) Focusing only on the negative qualities of someone else and thinking he is totally bad is irrational. People who do the wrong thing also have other positive qualities. (10) Only focusing on my negative qualities and concluding ‘I am hopeless’ is irrational. Even when I do the wrong thing, I still retain my positive qualities.”

During individual counseling sessions, specific interventions can target self-acceptance in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways that facilitate healthy development in young clients. As with classroom guidance activities, it is more effective if a variety of interventions employing different creative arts techniques are employed because there is a greater likelihood that younger clients will retain the concepts (Vernon & Barry, 2013).

Young children respond well to concrete techniques, such as using a balloon and a hard rubber ball to emphasize “bouncing back” after being put down, for example, for a child struggling with this issue, give him a balloon to blow up and tie, then give him a straight pin and ask him to prick the balloon with it until it pops. Then have him prick the rubber ball with the pin, discussing the difference between the balloon that pops and a rubber ball... the ball is still intact but the balloon isn’t. Use this method to help the child see that if he personalizes everything and thinks he is what others say he is when they put him down, he “deflates,” whereas if he thinks about

his strengths and weaknesses and doesn't personalize every bad thing others say about him, he will be much more likely to "bounce back" like a rubber ball.

Teenagers are notorious for "soaking up the negative" when peers call them names or put them down, so a concrete strategy that works well with this age group is to use a large sponge and a bucket of water. First have them hold the sponge when it is dry and light, then dip it in the bucket of water and hold it again. They readily realize that it is much heavier when it is wet. Draw the analogy that if they "soak up" everything others say about them without "wringing out" the sponge and differentiating between who they are and what others say they are, their self-acceptance is negatively impacted.

During individual counseling sessions, it is also important to help clients learn that they are complex human beings with multiple characteristics. Mental health practitioners and school counselors can use an intervention called The Whole Picture (Vernon, 2009, pp. 279–280) to convey this concept to clients struggling with this issue. Use a child's puzzle, a sheet of construction paper that is cut into ten shapes that fit together like a puzzle, transparent tape, and a pen. First have the client put the puzzle together, discussing what happens if there are missing pieces and that all pieces are needed to see the whole picture. Then give her the construction paper puzzle pieces and explain that this is a personal puzzle. She needs to think about different "pieces" of herself and write them on the individual pieces and then put her puzzle together and tape it. Again, discuss how all parts are needed for the "whole picture."

Another technique that can be used to enhance self-acceptance and teach clients to avoid equating their self-worth with how they describe themselves is called Who, Me? Yes, You (Vernon, 2009, p. 281). This intervention requires a short checklist with characteristics such as: intelligent, fun to be with, responsible, dependable, loyal, trustworthy, outgoing, popular, good looking, musically talented, and so forth. The client completes the checklist and you discuss which characteristics were like or unlike him, asking if he is "better" if he has more check marks. Then ask the client to read the characteristics out loud, saying "I am only a good person if I am _____ (intelligent, responsible, and so forth)." Tape recording this and playing it back helps clients really hear what they are saying: I am only a good person if ... and has proven to be an effective way of helping them understand that they are good regardless of specific characteristics.

Another intervention appropriate for adolescents is to engage them in an activity called IAWAC (Vernon, 2002, pp. 74–76). This strategy helps teenage clients understand that they don't have to take every criticism or comment personally and put themselves down as a result, helping them accept themselves and build emotional resiliency. First, give the client a sheet of paper with the letters IAWAC written across it, informing her that this paper represents her self-worth. Next, tell her a story about a girl who gets up late for school and is yelled at by her parents for being irresponsible, which sets off her whole day. She is almost late for the bus, so she can't sit with her friends who ignore her, she misses most of the problems on the algebra board drill and considers herself stupid, and she forgets to go to play practice, so her parents cite this as yet another example of her irresponsible behavior. As you read the story, instruct the client to tear off a part of her IAWAC sign each time she or someone else is critical of her. By the end of the story there won't be much left of

her worth. Then give her another IAWAC sign and tell the story again, but this time instead of tearing off part of the sign when she misses problems and calls herself stupid, the girl in the story thinks to herself, "I'm not a stupid person... I just missed problems," and tears off a smaller part of the sign. Or, instead of tearing off a large piece of her sign when her parents called her irresponsible, she could tear off a small piece while thinking to herself, "I may not be the most responsible kid, but that doesn't make me a bad person." At the end of the story, discuss the rational self-talk that helped the girl in the story to be more accepting of herself and how the client might use these concepts to deal with her own lack of self-acceptance.

Case study. The following case study illustrates further application of self-acceptance principles in individual counseling. The client is a 15-year-old female, referred to counseling by her parents who are concerned about her depression which they feel directly relates to low self-esteem and the pressure she puts on herself because she thinks she has to be perfect.

During the first session with Amanda, she admitted that she was very self-critical and that it contributed in a major way to her depression. When asked to talk more about feeling depressed, she stated that it was because she was ugly, fat, stupid, and unpopular. In fact, she was an attractive young woman who was not at all overweight and who was obviously not stupid based on the fact that her grades were all A's and B's. According to her parents, she did have friends and even a boyfriend, but as is typical with adolescents, those relationships would be on again and off again, which caused Amanda to think that she wasn't popular or worthy of having a boyfriend when the relationships were rocky. Unbeknownst to her parents, when she went through periods where she was rejected by friends or fighting with her boyfriend, she admitted to drinking rather heavily and also toyed with the idea of becoming anorexic because she thought that might make her more attractive.

It was so apparent that this young client had an unrealistic picture of herself and for some time had only seen herself in a negative light, which resulted in a lot of insecurity and anxiety, as well as depression. During an initial session, I gave her an envelope and asked her to write words describing the "public" Amanda on the outside—words that others would use to describe her. Although most of them were negative, there were a few positives. Then I invited her to write words that she used to describe herself—characteristics that others may not even know about her, and put those on slips of paper inside the envelope. When we discussed what she had written, it was once again very evident that she basically didn't see her strengths, only her weaknesses. Even challenging her perception that she was stupid with the fact that she got A's and B's was difficult because she stubbornly held onto the notion that she was stupid because she didn't get all A's and because she didn't, she wasn't a good person. In challenging this, I asked her if she would consider her best friend a bad person because she didn't get all A's, and Amanda said she wouldn't. "So if you wouldn't think your friend was a bad person, why would you think you are? Does that make sense?" She admitted that it didn't make much sense, but I could tell we needed to continue to work on letting go of this irrational belief.

It also appeared that Amanda was like Velcro; everything that was implied or directly stated or even misinterpreted by her would automatically "stick" to her. For example,

when her best friend was sitting by someone else, Amanda assumed she didn't like her and that she wasn't worthy of her friendship. Or, when her boyfriend didn't call her at the exact time he had said he would, she assumed he was out with another girl because she wasn't good enough for him. Incidents like this depressed her even more to the point where she didn't concentrate well at school and resulted in some bad grades on tests. Of course, this further confirmed her perception that she was stupid.

Several different interventions were employed over the course of many months to address self-acceptance issues, which seemed to be the root of Amanda's problems and were spiraling out of control. First, I shared the concept of unconditional self-acceptance—USA—with her, emphasizing that humans are fallible people who make mistakes, they are not their behavior, and that one doesn't have to be perfect to be worthwhile. To get these points across, I used an intervention entitled USA (Vernon, 2002, p. 78), which involved giving her a paper bag labeled USA. Inside the bag were five strips of paper with the following phrases, one per card: school performance, peer relationships, sports, music or drama, jobs or chores, daughter. I then explained that it is not good to globally rate herself as a good or a bad person, but rather, she should remember that she is comprised of many different traits and that it is preferable to rate those to give her a more accurate picture of herself. I encouraged her to think about her performance in each area and rate herself on a 1–5 scale, as objectively and factually as possible. True to form, she did not rate herself high in any category, so I challenged her perception that she was average in music with the fact that she had recently been asked to try out for an honor choir. “But I know I won't make the final cut,” she said. “You have a crystal ball, I asked?” “And even if you don't make it, doesn't the fact that you were asked to try out mean that you have better than average musical ability?” She reluctantly agreed. “But even if you actually had average or below average talent, does that make you a bad person, I asked?” “I guess not” was her response. I continued to work with her on each of the areas listed on the cards, helping her see that she did have strengths as well as weaknesses but that her worth as a person wasn't related to her performance or her behavior.

Another intervention was used to help her accept herself more unconditionally. Because she had a tendency to jump to conclusions that she wasn't good enough, I asked her to write down every single negative thought she had ever had about herself. Then one by one, we went through the list and I asked her to prove to me that she in fact was that “bad.” For example, one of the things on her list was that she was inconsiderate. I asked for an example, and she provided one. “Well,” I said, “surely there must be lots of other examples; name a few more.” She really couldn't think of any at the moment, so I asked her if it was in fact accurate to label herself as inconsiderate when she could only recall one incident. After doing some of this sort of challenging, I then asked her to select ten labels that she could let go of because they were one-time occurrences or over-generalizations. She selected these and then wrote them on individual slips of paper, stuffed them into balloons that she then blew up and tied. We went outside and she let them go. We continued to do this for the next two sessions until we got to the point where she had a more realistic concept of herself and was able to accept the labels that were left as part of her, but not defining her as a good or a bad person.

Another intervention used to help Amanda address her perfectionism was *Too Perfect?* (Vernon, 2009, pp. 283–285). This intervention utilized a short checklist

with items such as: I must be perfect because if I'm not, I'm not worthwhile; I must be perfect so that I am better than others; I must be perfect because others will like me better, and so forth. After she checked off the items that applied to her, we discussed the reasons why she thought she had to be perfect and talked about where her "should be perfect" ideas were coming from. Then she filled out a worksheet with three columns: why must I be perfect? advantages of being perfect, and disadvantages of being perfect. There were multiple lines under each category so that she could thoroughly explore this issue. Together we discussed her irrational idea that she had to be perfect to be accepted and worthwhile and weighed the advantages and disadvantages of demanding that she always be perfect. This took repeated work, but she gradually relaxed her self-imposed standards and found out that others still accepted her even if she wasn't perfect.

Helping children and adolescents understand and internalize the concept of self-acceptance isn't easy, but as this case illustrated, there are various ways to help them learn the concepts, and the end result benefits clients in numerous ways. If they can begin to think, like Amanda did, that they are worthwhile individuals regardless of their performance and that accepting themselves with strengths as well as weaknesses is a healthier way to live, they will be better able to face.

Teaching Self-Acceptance in Counseling Groups

With the efficacy of educational and clinical interventions for youth that typically have acceptance as a cornerstone to the theoretical approach (i.e., REBT), it stands to reason that promotion of acceptance is an important area to consider for application in counseling groups. As such, it is important to examine the impact of studies that specifically targeted self-acceptance and to what degree can self-acceptance be taught in a group-counseling format? Esposito (2009), in a meta-analytic review of REBT, reported that treatment conducted in a group format is just as effective as individual treatment with a strong mean effect size of group-based interventions of 0.87. Regrettably, as highlighted earlier, the outcome literature that clearly delineates the interventions that focus on self-acceptance is limited in nature. Typically, self-acceptance is one of a variety of interventions that are used in social-emotional learning and cognitive-behavioral interventions and often it is a challenge to discern from the literature how much and to what degree did the self-acceptance component of the intervention facilitate change. Further, with many investigations highlighting the positive impact of interventions on self-esteem, without clear distinctive definitions of self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-confidence, it may be difficult to truly understand the impact of the intervention on self-acceptance.

Using group counseling as a prevention program among Southeast Asian adolescent girls, Queener and Kenyon (2001) targeted "growth regarding self-acceptance" (p. 350) as a goal to be facilitated within a culturally relevant framework. While the authors do not provide any data to measure the outcome of this group approach, they do describe the therapeutic process and highlight promotion of self-acceptance

as it relates to cultural identification. This cultural component may be important for practitioners to consider when developing and implementing group-based interventions. Additional research that closely examines culture as a variable in developing and maintaining self-acceptance is warranted.

Below we provide some guidelines for clinicians and educators for how and where they could implement self-acceptance into a group therapy process. To begin, it would be important for the group leader to consider the purpose of the group and how self-acceptance could tie into the goals of the group. That is, if it is a specific type of group with homogeneity among the presenting clinical problem (e.g., depression), the group leader could provide education about the concept of self-acceptance and how it relates to the presenting problem. Alternatively, if the group is more heterogeneous in nature, the group leader may wish to identify self-acceptance as a core skill related to healthier functioning and that through the development of this skill, this will assist the students in working towards their goals. It is important for the group leader to consider to what degree self-acceptance might be contributing to some of the difficulties that students may be experiencing. By helping the students understand that by learning and applying the concepts taught in group therapy that it may assist in remediating some of the present difficulties that they are reporting it may also help prevent future problems from developing. This may enhance the students' engagement in the therapy process as well as motivate them to work towards change.

To guide the therapeutic process, we think it important to have clearly delineated goals of the group and goals for the individual within the group and regularly address these. While students may be more adept at identifying behavioral goals (e.g., "Stop fighting with my sister"; "Study more"), the group leader may use this as an opportunity to link these goals to self-acceptance and establish goals that link development of self-acceptance with a behavioral or emotive goal. These goals can then also be used as part of the weekly assignments between sessions. We suggest that assignments be more concrete with students and involve both behavioral and cognitive tasks. That is, if the goal was for an anxious student to ask to play basketball with the group that regularly plays without him, we would rehearse effective coping statements related to self-acceptance (e.g., "If I ask and they say NO, I can stand it and it does not mean I am a bad person"; "If I play and play very poorly, that is just one part of who I am. I still like who I am") with behavioral skill building (e.g., practicing what to say).

While the goals of the group may often be symptom reduction, it would be helpful for the group leader to provide a balance of approaches that targets specific symptoms for reduction as well as develops helpful coping strategies for promotion of self-acceptance going forward. That is, group leaders may wish to target unhealthy beliefs that may be leading to specific negative affective states and problematic behaviors while also promoting healthier, more self-accepting beliefs. Tying these self-accepting beliefs into healthier, adaptive behaviors may also be something that the group leader wants to educate the group members about. As an example, for students who may be experiencing symptoms of depression, the group leader could target and challenge unhealthy beliefs (e.g., "I am stupid because I failed the test") while also reinforcing more self-accepting beliefs (e.g., "Failing a test does not make me a failure") while also teaching organizational and study skills.

Within group therapy, psycho-education about the concept of self-acceptance can be a challenge for the group leader. That is, in comparison with teaching social skills, a behavior that can be seen, students may not see the benefit of developing this abstract concept of self-acceptance. With younger students, psycho-education may focus more on the development of an emotional vocabulary initially before working on introducing abstract concepts like irrational beliefs and self-acceptance. Group leaders may wish to try some icebreaker activities that can provide for an opportunity for discussion of self-acceptance. For example, group leaders can have students make lists of three things that they are good at and three things that they are not good at. They can then look at what feelings they experience when they are asked to do both these “good” and “bad” tasks and how they feel about themselves when they succeed and when they fail. Some will report no differences in their feelings while others may present with some negative self-talk (e.g., “I think I’m an idiot”). This would provide the leader with the opportunity to introduce the concept of self-acceptance and how oftentimes we link our ratings of ourselves to some external criteria of success and failure.

Other approaches towards psycho-education may involve use of cartoons or movie clips to demonstrate how others may have examples of low or high self-acceptance. As students come to understand the concept of self-acceptance, they may then be asked for personal examples where they have rated themselves and not their behavior and have experienced unhealthy emotions as a result. The group may then work on examining the different unhealthy beliefs that may be contributing to their affective state and create and practice, newer, healthier, self-accepting beliefs. Students may then be asked how they think they would feel and behave if in fact they truly thought in this more self-accepting manner. We think that this may be particularly helpful to have be a part of the group process, as peers may learn how to challenge the unhealthy beliefs and become more accepting by the modeling of these behaviors by others when they are not the focus of the discussion. That is, if they are on the “hot seat” and are the focus of the discussion they may just wish to get “off” the hot seat and may not process all the discussion about acceptance. Alternatively, when it is not their problem, they may be more likely to understand the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and be able to generalize it to themselves.

In addition to psycho-education and goal setting, several strategies may also assist in building self-acceptance in the group therapy process. These include role-playing of situations where students may be particularly prone to rate themselves and having them practice self-acceptance statements along with strategies to behaviorally manage these situations. An additional exercise that can help reinforce self-acceptance among group members would be to have them write situations where they have rated themselves on a piece of paper and have the group leader put these up on the board and have the group challenge those ideas and develop alternative, healthy ways to think. Another strategy to enhance self-acceptance may be more behaviorally oriented by having group members do something they normally would not do for fear of failure and practice self-acceptance (Terjesen & Esposito, 2005).

While the concept of self-acceptance is core for a number of clinical interventions, educational programs, and preventative strategies, group-based approaches may be an effective strategy in which to teach these beliefs to youth. Students who

are prone to rate themselves may benefit from hearing that they are not alone in this tendency while also receiving support from the group leaders and their peers in challenging these self-rating beliefs and developing more of an accepting philosophy. Students may also be more motivated to change their rating behavior when participating in a group as opposed to being in individual therapy and the group may be seen as a safe environment for them to take risks.

Self-Acceptance of Teachers: Professional Development

The extent to which teachers are self-accepting is a determining factor in their ability to inculcate self-acceptance in their students. This awareness involves an understanding of the negative effects of self-deprecations and the positive effects that self-acceptance has on their own development and well-being. Research (Bums, 1989) has shown a positive association between teacher self-acceptance and positive attitudes towards students including handling conflict situations as well as progressive child-centered educational practices.

Teachers need time and opportunity to begin to internalize self-acceptance. Experience (MEB) has been that teachers come to appreciate the importance of teaching self-acceptance to their students when they see its relevance and utility for their own job performance and well-being. Bernard (2013) has developed a teacher professional development program *The Character Strength of Self-Acceptance: I Accept Myself No Matter What* that is designed to be presented to groups of teachers in a half-day workshop (see Appendix 6 for a sample summary handout from the program of tips to increase teacher self-acceptance).

Conclusion

We are of the opinion that self-acceptance is vital to the emotional well-being and productivity of all members of a school community—students, teachers, support staff, administrators, and parents. We believe “acceptance” should be explicitly incorporated as a core value of a school and incorporated within school culture. All members of a school community will benefit from the character strength of self-acceptance that communicates the importance of valuing oneself because of one’s unique strengths and differences and not using the opinions of others or one’s performance as the measuring rod or scale of one’s worth as a person. It is clear that more research needs to be conducted to determine the relationship of self-acceptance to other character strengths and social-emotional skills as well as to isolate its’ influence in effecting positive change in young people. We are also keen to learn more about the relationship of self-acceptance and self-regard in terms of their relative contributions to positive emotions and life satisfaction of young people.

Appendix 1 Child and Adolescent Survey of Self-Acceptance (Bernard, 2012a)

Gender: (circle one): boy girl School _____
 Grade/Class _____

When you are ready to begin, please reach each sentence below and pick your answer by circling a number from “1” to “5.” The five possible answers for each sentence are:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Not Sure 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

For example, if you were given the sentence “I like to read comic books,” you would circle a “1” if you Strongly Disagree. If you were given the sentence “I like to keep my room neat and tidy,” you would circle a “5” if you Strongly Agree. Please be sure to answer all of the questions.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
1. When I think about me, I am proud of whom I am	1	2	3	4	5
2. Saying something stupid in front of others shows I am an idiot	1	2	3	4	5
3. When my father or mother criticizes me for doing the wrong thing, I know that I still have my good points	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am someone who needs my friends to like me to feel important and to be worthwhile	1	2	3	4	5
5. When a classmate treats me unfairly, I think I must be a hopeless person	1	2	3	4	5
6. When a classmate teases me about the way I look or talk or what I say, I think it is okay to be different	1	2	3	4	5
7. When my friends don't ask me to do things with them, I think I'm a loser	1	2	3	4	5
8. When I get a lower grade than I want, I am good at reminding myself that I am capable.	1	2	3	4	5
9. When I think about what I cannot do very well, I still proud of who I am	1	2	3	4	5
10. People would like me more if I wasn't such a loser	1	2	3	4	5
11. When I don't succeed in school in a subject that is important to me, I am likely to think I'm a complete failure	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know a lot about my positive qualities	1	2	3	4	5
13. When things are boring, I think I'm a dull and uninteresting person	1	2	3	4	5

(continued)

(continued)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
14. When I look in the mirror and see something I don't like (for example, my hair, my skin, my nose), I know I still have good things about me	1	2	3	4	5
15. When I make mistakes in my schoolwork, I can think of things I am good at	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am someone who needs to get good grades to feel important and worthwhile	1	2	3	4	5

Positive Self-Regard : $\bar{1} + \bar{3} + \bar{6} + \bar{8} + \bar{9} + \bar{12} + \bar{14} + \bar{15}$

Negative Self-Evaluation : $\bar{2} + \bar{4} + \bar{5} + \bar{7} + \bar{10} + \bar{11} + \bar{13} + \bar{16}$

Appendix 2 Introducing Self-Acceptance to Your Students

I want to introduce you to a topic we are going to be learning about over the next few weeks that is called “Self Acceptance.” I’ll write that on the board for you to see.

Who has an idea of what you think we might mean by “self acceptance?” Think about it yourself and then take a minute to talk quietly to the person beside you about what those words might mean.

Who wants to share your ideas with the class? Let’s hear a few ideas around the room. Great suggestions! You’re really on the ball!

We say “Self Acceptance is being proud of who you are no matter what.” I’ll write that on the board.

Now, why do we think it is so important to teach you about self-acceptance? Well, self-acceptance is a powerful thing. It can help you to stay positive when you hit a challenging situation. And we all have those at times, don’t we?

Has anyone ever got a bad mark on a project or a test? Well, accepting myself thinking encourages us to not to be too hard on ourselves and put ourselves down when something like that happens.

Has anyone ever been teased, or left out of a game? Well, accepting myself thinking encourages us not to think badly about ourselves just because of something someone else said or did.

Has anyone ever felt bad because they weren’t able to do something very well and other kids could do it well? Well, accepting myself thinking reminds us that we can’t be good at everything and that we all have our own skills and talents.

So, hands up who thinks they’d like to learn more about this important topic? Fantastic! And do you know what? It’s not just kids who need to learn about self-acceptance! It’s adults too! Your teachers, your parents, EVERYONE needs to work on developing and practicing their self-acceptance!

Appendix 3 Introducing Self-Acceptance (Bernard, 2013)

Self-acceptance means

... being aware of all your strengths (personal, family, cultural) and your not-so-positive qualities that everyone has because no one is perfect. It also means being aware of how you are similar to and different from others...

... you believe that it is okay to be different. You believe you have the right to be yourself and the way you want to be providing that the health and wellbeing of others and yourself are respected.

... if you are not good at doing something, if someone is critical of you or if you have behaved badly, you still respect who you are while trying to improve what you do. You do not think negatively about who you are.

... you do not need everyone to like you all the time to feel worthwhile. You do not need to get the top grade to feel that you are valuable. You do not judge your self-worth by your school performance and by what other people think of you.

... you are proud of who you are because of your special and important qualities.

Examples of “Accepting Myself” Self-Talk

Happening: You get a C- in English.

Self-Talk: “Let’s try and get more out of the next exam, Let’s have more practice. My value as a person is not made up by my test/exam score.”

Happening: Being excluded from a game.

Self-Talk: “I can cope with being excluded, it doesn’t mean I am a loser. I am who I am, I’m still proud of who I am. I don’t need to be included in a game to feel good about myself, to be a worthwhile people.”

Happening: Failing a test on one of my good subjects.

Self-Talk: “I can try again. Believe in myself. Be resilient. Be myself.”

Happening: When I am not good enough at doing something.

Self-Talk: “I don’t need to be good/have to be good at everything. It’s who I am and who I think I am that’s important.” “I need to respect myself for who I am.”

Happening: Not doing so well on a math test.

Self-Talk: “I’m better at other things. Everyone is different and this test isn’t the end of the world even if it was challenging. I am proud of me.”

Happening: Being talked about behind my back.

Self-Talk: “I can choose whether I let this get me down or not. I am the best I can be. I have to accept myself. I am proud of what I am.”

Appendix 4 Examples of Student Feedback: Accepting Myself (Bernard, 2013)

Write down what Accepting Myself means to you...

1. To know and be proud of who I am and to accept myself with my good qualities despite any troubles or issues I may have.
2. Accepting who you are and be proud to be you. Don't try to be like someone else just be yourself. It is good to be different, no one is perfect.
3. Even though I'm not perfect and different to others I am still me and I have unique things about who I am. Be proud of yourself and just be you.
4. You accept yourself as who you are, what you do, and not be ashamed if you are different from others.
5. To appreciate what I have got and to be myself the way I want to be.
6. Everyone has different qualities (good or bad) and you need to accept those qualities.
7. Being proud and happy for who you are because no one is the same or perfect.
8. Everyone has a right to be who they are even when they do something bad. Everyone is different with pros and cons and they can change.
9. If you're not good at something, you need to accept who you are and your bad qualities that you might need to improve in.
10. Accepting both the good and bad qualities about yourself even though you would prefer something different.
11. Being proud of who you are and believing in yourself no matter what happens.
12. Accepting all of yourself, the bad qualities and the good.
13. Accepting you and other people for who they are and with their different qualities.
14. I know I'm not good at some things but I'm not going to get angry with myself.

Appendix 5 Examples of Curriculum Lessons that Teach Self-Acceptance

Cool Cat (Vernon, 2006)—grades 1/2

Objective: To learn how to accept yourself for who you are.

Materials: A copy of the Cool Cat story.

Procedure

1. Read the following story to children.

Cool Cat

Once upon a time there was a black cat named Blackie. Blackie was a very unhappy cat and everyone knew it. When his mother would purr and tell him what a beautiful coat of black fur he had, Blackie would hiss, “Don’t call me Blackie—I hate my color.” So his mother stopped mentioning the color of his fur and instead, praised him for being such a good mouser. Blackie snarled at her and said angrily, “I’m not a good mouser—most of them get away.” So his mother stopped commenting on his ability as a mouser, and instead told him how happy she was that he could jump so high. “That’s no big deal... all cats can jump high,” said Blackie. Her mother just shook her head. “Oh, Blackie,” she said, why can’t you accept yourself as you are? You’re a cool cat and you can do lots of things. Sure, “there are things you can’t do, but that’s how it is for every cat. Isn’t there anything you like about yourself?” Blackie meowed softly, “Well, I sort of like the white tip on my tail, even though I wish I had white paws too.”

“You are right—your tail is very pretty, but you can’t change the fact that your paws aren’t white. Does it make you happy to think about things like this that you can’t change about yourself?” asked Mama Cat.

“I guess not, but I just wish I could be a great mouser like Tom cat, and I wish I had tan fur like Toffee cat.”

“I understand that you might like to be different, but just like you can’t change the color of your paws, you can’t change the color of your fur. But, maybe you could learn to be a better mouser if you paid close attention to how Tom cat does it. But even if you aren’t a great mouser, does that make you a bad cat?”

“I suppose not,” replied Blackie. “That’s right,” said Mama Cat. “It doesn’t make you a bad cat, it just makes you a cat who can do some things better than others. And since you told me that it doesn’t make you happy to think about what you can’t do or how you don’t think you are as cool as other cats, what can you do the next time you start thinking about the things you don’t like?”

“Well,” said Blackie, I could...

2. Elicit responses from the children about what Blackie could do when he starts thinking about what he doesn’t like about himself.

Discussion

Content Questions

1. What did Blackie like about himself?
2. What didn't Blackie like about himself?
3. What advice did Mama cat have for Blackie about accepting himself?

Personalization Questions

1. What are some things you like about yourself?
2. Are there things you would like to change? Invite sharing
3. If there are things you don't like about yourself, does that mean there is nothing good about you?
4. What can you tell yourself if you are acting like Blackie and only thinking about the things you don't like about yourself?

To the Leader

Emphasize the concept of self-acceptance—accepting oneself with positive as well as negative qualities.

A Lesson to Teach Self-Acceptance (Bernard, 2007; grades 5+)

Objectives

1. Students will be able to state a word (emotional vocabulary) for describing how they feel when something bad happens (“down”).
2. Students will be able to identify their positive and not-so-positive characteristics.
3. Students will be able to state that all people are made up of positive and not-so-positive characteristics.
4. Students will be able to explain that it doesn't make sense to rate themselves as bad or hopeless when something negative happens.
5. Students will learn that if they want to get along with themselves and not feel so down when something bad happens, they can think Accepting Myself thoughts.

Materials

Handouts for Students

Notes

All children are vulnerable to negative events and circumstances that occur at school and home that involve rejection (e.g. being teased, criticized, yelled at, or laughed at, having a bad hair day or bad skin, being excluded) or lack of achievement (e.g. poor years on report card, many errors on a spelling test, “red” comments made by teacher on written assignment, losing at tennis, poor performance relative to peers).

In this session, you will be providing children with a form of resistance or inoculation so that when they encounter negative events, they have a self-protecting Habit of the Mind we call Accepting Myself. The natural instinct of most children when exposed to negative events (rejection, lack of achievement) is to think, “Because this

bad thing has happened, I am a loser and a failure.” This pattern of thinking called Self-Downing leads to low self-acceptance if children are exposed to a sufficient number of bad events or a few intense negative events (e.g. harsh treatment by a parent, reading difficulties). In teaching Accepting Myself, you will want to help children to: (1) identify their positive and not-so-good characteristics; (2) understand that they do not lose their positives when something bad happens; and (3) understand that it doesn’t make sense to ever think of themselves as totally hopeless when something bad happens or because they have one or more not-so-good characteristics.

The goal for children when confronted with a negative event is to think to themselves: “This is not so good, but it is not the end of the world. I am still me. I still have many terrific qualities. I am still capable of achieving.” Accepting Myself is a powerful Habit of the Mind to combat the inevitable knocks all children experience.

Scripted Lesson

I. Introductory Discussion

- A. If you are a new visitor to a classroom and students do not know you, introduce yourself as a psychologist, counsellor, social worker, or teacher and ask for someone to define what a psychologist/counsellor/social worker does. If you are a teacher, emphasize that teachers are interested in teaching students a whole range of skills for not only doing the best they can in their school work, but also in getting along with each other.
- B. To develop rapport with the students ask them to state their name before responding to your questions. Rather than stand in the front of the class, circulate among the students so that you become more familiar to them. As well, determine from the students the class rule for responding to questions and listening to others so that students do not simply call out their answers and talk while others are talking.

II. Introductory Discussion/Activity: “Who Wants to Feel Down?”

- A. Indicate that the purpose of today’s session is to learn some new ideas about how to stay confident when you are not having a very good day.
- B. Ask for a definition of Confidence. Provide a general definition including: not being overly concerned with what others think if you make a mistake or do your work, not being afraid to fail, not being too hard on yourself when you make mistakes in your school work, and having trust in yourself that you will be successful (e.g. predicting eventual success).
- C. Distribute the Handouts for Students and draw students attention to the Emotional Thermometer worksheet. Indicate that it measures how upset someone gets.
- D. In a humorous manner, display the emotion of feeling down (e.g. looking miserable). Say aloud what happened to you such as, “I’ve just been called a ‘jerk’ by four kids in my class and I feel _____,” (ask students to guess the feeling). In displaying the feeling of being down, ask for different words to describe the feeling. Indicate that the word you would use to describe how you feel when someone is not nice to you or when things are not going well in your schoolwork is “down.”

Happenings	Feeling
??	Very down (8–10°) Lose confidence

- E. Using the chart above, ask for some examples of things that can happen at school and at home that can lead them to getting very down (point to the top part of the thermometer 8–10°). Ask several students to volunteer answers. As students provide answers, write them below the word “Happening.” Look for the following: not being allowed to play, not getting invited to a class party, someone making a mean comment (teasing), not doing well in a test, classmates laughing at an answer given by a student to a teacher’s question, and getting badly criticized for not doing homework. As students self-disclose a time/situation when they felt down, ask for a show of hands of other classmates who also get down when the same type of event occurs. Discuss how, when you get very down, you tend to lose your confidence.
- F. Ask the silly question: “Who likes the feeling of being very down?” Gain agreement that it doesn’t feel very nice. Explain that the specific purpose of the lesson is for students to learn what they can do when something bad happens to them so that they do not get so down and so they do not lose their confidence.
- G. On the board, display the following summary diagram using examples provided by students of “happenings” that can get them down:

Happening	→	Thinking	→	Feeling
Being teased		??		Down (8–10°)
Being yelled at				Lose confidence
Not being allowed to play				
Getting a bad grade				

Ask the question: “When you get very down (7, 8, 9, or 10 on the Emotional Thermometer), what would you be thinking about yourself when something bad happens?” Acknowledge all answers, but write down in the “Thinking” column the answer that either a student (or you) provide: “I’m dumb,” “I’m stupid,” “I’m no good.” Explain that the thinking illustrated in the next diagram is called “negative” thinking. Explain how it is their thinking—rather than the happening—that causes them to feel down and lose their confidence. Ask for students to explain this relationship until everyone in the class understands. You might also indicate that negative thoughts are not sensible, not true, and not helpful. (Depending on the age/cognitive maturity of the students, you can substitute the words “irrational thoughts” for “negative thoughts.”)

Happening	→	Thinking	→	Feeling
Being teased		“I’m dumb”		Down (8–10°)
		“I’m no good”		Lose confidence
Being yelled at		“I’m hopeless”		
Not being allowed to play				
Getting a bad grade				

- H. Explain that you will show students a way of thinking that will help them to not get so down—but rather, feel confident—when something bad happens to them.

Ask students, “Rather than feeling very down—8 to 10 on the Emotional Thermometer—what would be a better emotional temperature to have?” Gain agreement that feeling only a little down—say, 3 to 4—would be better.

Indicate that they will need to rip up their negative, irrational thoughts and substitute more positive rational thoughts. Explain that the next activity will help them discover more rational and positive things to think when something bad happens.

Illustrate these relationships as follows

Happening	→	Thinking	→	Feeling
Being teased		“I’m dumb”		Down (8–10°)
Being yelled at		“I’m no good”		Lose confidence
Not being allowed to play		“I’m hopeless”		
Getting a bad grade		??		A little down (3–4°)
				Still confident

III. “Complex You” Individual Activity

- A. Draw student’s attention to the student worksheet Self-Wheel. Instruct students to fill in the appropriate wheel spoke (+) or (–) as you read aloud the following unfinished statements (emphasize that “I don’t know” or “Nothing” are not acceptable answers):
1. I am good at _____
 2. I could improve in _____
 3. One of the things I like best about myself is _____
 4. One thing I would like to change about myself is _____
 5. Other people think or say I am good at _____
 6. Other people say I need to improve in _____
 7. One very good thing I have done is _____
 8. One mistake I have made is _____
- B. Invite students who finish early to illustrate each spoke using markers, crayons, and pens to create pictures within each space.
- C. Call on several students to share their wheels with the class, explaining the content of each spoke. Make the point that all people are complex, not simple, and that it is important for each of the students to be aware of their good points as well as those areas that could be improved on. Emphasize that people’s good qualities are not just trying hard and getting good grades in school. Lots of other characteristics of themselves are important too. Ask: “What’s more important, getting an ‘A’ in reading or being a good friend?” Answer: they are both good qualities to have.

- D. Ask students if they would throw out a bicycle if they found that one of its wheels had a broken spoke. Ask them to explain their answers. Ask them whether it makes sense to think they're hopeless and negate their good points when something bad happens.
- E. Ask for some suggestions about more positive ways to think about yourself when something bad happens at school or home, with friends or strangers, or even if you are simply having a bad hair day. Use the following diagram as illustration, including comments by students covering their new way of thinking.

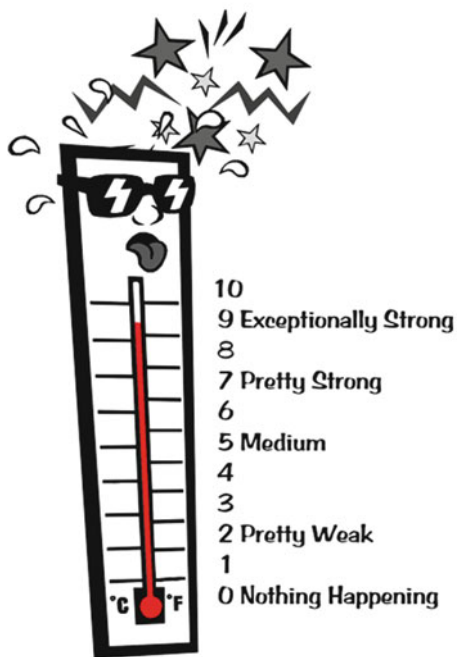
Happening	➔	Thinking	➔	Feeling
Being teased		"I'm dumb"		Down (8-10°)
Being yelled at				Lose confidence
Not being allowed to play				
Getting a bad grade		"I'm no good"		
		"I'm hopeless"		
		"Even though that thing happened, I'm still capable and people like me"		A little down (3-4°)
				Still confident

- F. the activity by emphasizing that everyone has choices about how to think about themselves when something bad happens. Encourage students to think positive, rational thoughts.

IV. Homework Activity: Don't Think Negatively

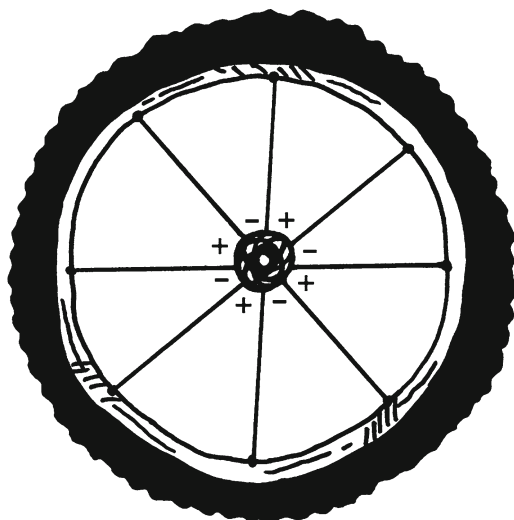
- A. Draw students' attention to the worksheet Don't Think Negatively. Instruct students that for homework you would like them to draw a picture of some event that has happened to them at school where they ended up feeling down (7, 8, 9, or 10 on the Emotional Thermometer) or draw something that could happen at school where they would get to feeling down. Ask them to write down any negative thoughts that they had at the time or that would get them down (e.g. "I'm hopeless, dumb, no one likes me,"). Indicate that in the last activity, you will be asking students to substitute their negative thoughts for positive thoughts.
- B. You will want to make the point that students (as does everyone) have a choice about what to think when something bad happens. Ask the question: "Who controls your thinking?" Reinforce the idea that we determine what we think, not our parents or teachers. This is our personal source of power to deal with the not-so-nice things that can happen.
- C. Ask students to practise more positive and/or rational ways of thinking during the week if something bad happens.

Student Worksheet The Emotional Thermometer



Directions: Fill in the spaces between the spokes of this wheel by completing the statements your teacher reads aloud.

Student Worksheet Self-Wheel



Appendix 6 Self-Help Tips for Strengthening Your Self-Acceptance (Bernard, 2012b)

Self-Acceptance Boosters

- Starting the day with a positive mindset holding yourself in high regard and knowing that no matter what happens, you will accept yourself.
- Pat yourself on the back when you have completed something difficult. Do not take your success for granted!
- Take the time to think about how you look and how you come across to others—looking confident helps boost your self-acceptance.
- Have a positive and open attitude toward change—change of job, house, and friends.
- Relax in pressure situations like meeting someone new or doing something where you might not be successful at first.
- Think back to the last time you succeeded at doing something that was hard to do and remind yourself: “I’ve done hard things before, I can do this now!”
- Expressing your opinion knowing that others may disagree; being able to accept their disagreements as professional not personal.

Self-Acceptance Busters

- Getting down and taking things personally
- Blowing bad things out of proportion
- Needing people to approve of everything you do
- Having to do things perfectly
- Over-focussing on things that go wrong including people’s opinion of you
- Ignoring positive events

Use Self-Accepting Self-Talk

“It is normally better to be liked by others, but disapproval does not make me a worse person.”

“I accept who I am, even though I may not like some of my traits and behaviors.”

“My performance at work—perfect or otherwise—does not determine my worth as a person.”

“Mistakes and setbacks are inevitable. I will accept myself while disliking my mistakes and setbacks.”

“No matter what, I accept myself.”

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