

Want to Raise a Good Person? -- Stop Nurturing Your Child's Self-Esteem

By Dennis Prager

By now, most people (with the exception of many psychotherapists) recognize that the self-esteem movement officially launched by California in 1986 has been at best silly and at worst injurious to society, despite whatever small benefit it may have had to some individuals.

The movement was begun by California Assemblyman John Vasconcellos. As The New York Times reported, "Mr. Vasconcellos, a 53-year-old Democrat, is described by an aide as 'the most radical humanist in the Legislature.'"

In an interview at the time, Vasconcellos told me he had personally benefited from therapy. It enabled him to improve the poor self-esteem he had inherited from his childhood. He therefore concluded that improving other people's self-esteem would greatly help society.

And so, California created its Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, whose guiding principle was to raise young people's self-esteem in order to increase the number of socially responsible people in society.

This belief -- that increasing self-esteem among the members of society will increase goodness in society -- spread through the rest of America like proverbial wildfire.

It turns out, however, that the premise was entirely misguided. There is no correlation between goodness and high self-esteem. But there is a correlation between criminality and high self-esteem.

Florida State University Professor Roy Baumeister (Ph.D. psychology, Princeton University) has revealed that in a lifetime of study of violent criminals, the one characteristic nearly all these criminals share is high self-esteem.

Yes, people with high self-esteem are the ones most prone to violence.

The 1960s and '70s ushered in what I refer to as the Age of Feelings. And one of the most enduring feelings-based notions that came out of that era was that it was critically important that children feel good

about themselves. High self-esteem, it was decided, should be imparted to children whenever possible -- no matter how undeserving. That is why boys on losing teams are given trophies, why more and more high schools have ceased naming a valedictorian (lest the other graduates feel bad about themselves), why some states have abolished winning and losing in children's soccer games (lest those on the losing teams suffer low self-esteem), etc.

A friend of mine provided me with a perfect illustration. At a Little League baseball game, he saw a pitch thrown a few feet above the batter's head. Needless to say, the batter didn't swing. But to my friend's amazement, he heard both the batter's father and coach yell out, "Good eye!"

For those who don't know baseball, it does not take a "good eye" not to swing at a ball thrown over one's head. It takes a functioning eye.

One result of all this has been a generation that thinks highly of itself for no good reason. Perhaps the most famous example is the survey of American high school students and those of seven other countries. Americans came in last in mathematical ability but first in self-esteem about their mathematical ability.

But it turns out that feeling good about oneself for no good reason -- as destructive as that is -- is not the biggest problem.

The child-rearing expert, psychologist John Rosemond, recently opened my eyes to the even more troubling problem: High self-esteem in children does not produce good character, and in fact is likely to produce a less moral individual.

This flies in the face of perhaps the deepest-held conviction among the present generation, as well as the baby boomers: That it is a parent's fundamental obligation to ensure that their child has high self-esteem.

Though I always opposed undeserved self-esteem, I, too, had bought into the belief that self-esteem in children is vital.

But as soon as Rosemond said what he said, I realized he was right.

And since he said that, I have analyzed the finest adults I know well. It turns out that none had high self-esteem as a child. In fact, virtually most of them "suffered" -- as it would now be deemed -- from low self-esteem.

To cite one example, one of the finest human beings I have ever known -- an individual of extraordinary courage, integrity and selflessness -- had a father who constantly berated this person as worthless and stupid.

Now, this father was, to put it mildly, a sick man. And he did indeed have a negative psychological impact on his child -- to this day, this person has low self-esteem. But it had no negative impact on this individual's sterling character.

The more I have thought about it, the more I have put Baumeister's and Rosemond's insights together.

If Baumeister is right, and violent criminals have higher self-esteem than most people, and if Rosemond is right, and people who do not grow up with high self-esteem are more likely to be among the finest human beings, then society has the strongest interest in not promoting self-esteem among children. Society's sole interest should be creating people of good character, not people with high self-esteem. And good character is created by teaching self-control, not self-esteem.

Now, let me be clear. No one is recommending that parents never praise a child or that parents seek to cultivate a low self-image in their child. And we assume that the child knows his parents love him/her. But, if raising good adults is the primary task of a parent -- and it surely must be -- trying to give one's child high self-esteem is not helpful, and it can easily be counterproductive.

If you don't agree with this conclusion, do the following: Ask the finest people you know how much self-esteem they had as a child. Then ask all the narcissists you know how much their parent(s) praised them.