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Family Focus

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Jake's father, "Brian," thought that Jake spent too much time in his room playing games on his computer. In our sessions, Brian often mentioned this complaint, and Jake was angry and frustrated that his dad harped on this topic. Jake was also very hurt that his dad didn't give him credit for all the things he was doing well. He looked up to his father who was a highly accomplished professional, and hearing his dad's continuous criticism caused him to feel anxious and depressed.

After discussing this issue, Brian realized that what really bothered him is that Jake didn't talk much to him and isolated in his room when he was home. However, Jake's mom said that Jake did talk to her and that she was comfortable with their relationship.

It made sense that Jake didn't want to continually be judged and criticized by his dad, so he avoided him. It was a vicious cycle since the more Jake isolated himself, the more his dad complained about his video-game playing. Then, the more Brian complained, the more Jake stayed in his room.

Finally, Jake was able to tell his father how his nagging and pointed remarks were interfering with their relationship, and how his negative approach was doing nothing to motivate Jake to do anything differently. Fortunately, Brian was able to let Jake know he understood, and he agreed not to keep bringing up video games. He told Jake in detail how proud he was of him for his accomplishments and also for all of his personal qualities. Brian then acknowledged how he felt shut out of Jake's life and really just wanted to spend time with him.

Encourage your children to have very high expectations of themselves and others.

It's a good idea for your children to have reasonable expectations of themselves and others - just not unrealistically high ones. There's a difference between having goals and having high expectations. Goals are motivating and help children focus, whereas high expectations can create pressure, dissatisfaction and anxiety. Goals are more open-ended; it would be great to accomplish them, but if we fall short, hopefully we can take it in our stride. Expectations are more exacting and demanding. There is no allowance for error or not meeting them. Expecting too much of ourselves often leads to perfectionism which can be tough on self-esteem.

One example is a child with an older sibling who excels in sports and is on several varsity teams in high school. Help your younger child find his or her strengths and passions without trying to match or surpass a sibling's accomplishments. Actively talk your child out of thinking that he or she must follow in anyone's

Last time we looked at some common ways parents may inadvertently contribute to lowering children's self-esteem. Here are a few more:

Emphasize how other kids or siblings are doing well - in a sport or school or a performance or exhibiting good manners.

You want your children to take note of others who may serve as role models for them and you may want to inspire your children to try harder to excel. No matter how you present it, though, your children will likely compare themselves and feel less successful.

Of course, sometimes you want to compliment another child directly. If your child is present, it's best to say something short and sweet. And if your child is especially sensitive, you can bring up something positive about him or her as well. For example, "Brody, you did such a good job scoring today. And Austin (your child), it was great watching you do so well on defense."

Frequently bring up what your children are doing wrong, and then continue to mention it.

One family I worked with had a teenage son who spent a great deal of time playing video games online. "Jake" was also an excellent student, had a group of good friends, and played soccer on his high school junior varsity team.

footsteps. We often see this in the case of college admissions where an older sibling or a parent has gone to a prestigious college. If your younger child can't qualify, it's important to start early on building up your child's sense of identity and self-confidence. Be sure to find skills, talents, and personal qualities that are special to your child and find ways to help him or her get recognition for these.

Often, expecting too much of ourselves goes hand in hand with having high expectations of others. Some children become frustrated when a parent doesn't just know how they feel or what they want for dinner without words needing to be said. Or they become extremely hurt if they feel left out by a close friend who should always be aware of their feelings. Standards for others can be so high that invariably your children will often be hurt or disappointed or feel wronged. Help your children to expect that sometimes others will let us down, often unintentionally. Your children may well let others down at times too. Help them learn how to set reasonable expectations of others and deal with occasional letdowns. Above all, help them learn to speak up appropriately to ask for what they want and to let others know how they feel. Role-playing with them can be very helpful.

Don't allow your children to express their feelings about your rules and behavior.

An adult male I've been working with has dealt with low self-esteem all of his life. "Jeff's" mother was angry, narcissistic and controlling. She only could see her point of view and her concerns were the only valid ones in the family. After being raged at or ignored by his mother most of the time, Jeff learned not to speak very much at home. His father worked long hours and was passive and quiet. Jeff didn't have much of a relationship with him either.

Jeff married a woman he met at work. Soon after they got married, Jeff began having sex with other women he met online. He also started drinking heavily. He didn't know how to have emotional intimacy with anyone and by acting out in these ways, he kept his wife at a distance. After she threatened to leave with their two children, Jeff tried to manage these temptations by going to AA meetings and curbing his impulsive self-gratifying behavior. However, he soon showed signs of a huge anger problem, both at home and at work.

Growing up, Jeff never learned how to discuss his feelings, and was actively discouraged from doing this by his both of his parents. As an adult, he only knew how to be passive and uncommunicative like his father or angry and raging like his mother.

Helping your children express themselves, even if you'd rather not hear their critical remarks, is a loving and helpful act. Releasing feelings in a safe environment helps them to avoid internalizing them, a consequence that can contribute to anxiety and depression. Teach them to do this appropriately and as calmly as possible by being encouraging and accepting. Let them know that blasting you with "I hate you" or "I wish you weren't my mother or father" is not the preferred way to express themselves. Encourage them to tell you if they are angry at you and why. Sharing their feelings with you will not only help them now, but will also help them in future relationships with others in their lives.

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