# 1

What is self-esteem?

■ CLARIFYING THE TERMINOLOGY ■

The development of the positive qualities of personal integrity, self-acceptance, respect for the needs of others, and the ability to empathize would comprise the ideal self in a civilized society. It is the development of these ideals that are the goals of a self-esteem enhancement programme as defined in this book. In order to achieve these goals it is important first to clarify the terms used in self-esteem enhancement. We all have our own idea of what we mean by self-esteem, but in any discussion of self-esteem amongst a group of teachers there are likely to be several different definitions. The chances are that amongst these definitions the words *self-concept*, *ideal self* and *self-image* will appear.

The fact is that the literature until fairly recently has tended to use many terms like these to mean the same thing. It is no wonder teachers therefore have been confused and as a result have tended to dismiss the concept as yet another of those ambiguous terms so often found in discussions of education. Fortunately, the concept has gradually been more clearly defined thanks to the work of people like Argyle in Britain and Rogers in the USA.
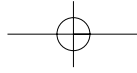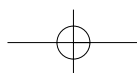
SELF-CONCEPT

The term *self-concept* is best defined as the sum total of an individual's mental and physical characteristics and his/her evaluation of them. As such it has three aspects: the cognitive (thinking); the affective (feeling); and the behavioural (action). In practice, and from the teacher's point of view, it is useful to consider this self-concept as developing in three areas – self-image, ideal self and self-esteem. Self-esteem, of course, is the focus of this book. To understand the concept of self-esteem, however, it is necessary to define self-image and ideal self.

Self-concept is the umbrella term under which the other three develop. The self-concept is the individual's awareness of his/her own self. It is an awareness of one's own identity. The complexity of the nature of the 'self' has occupied the thinking of philosophers for centuries and was not considered to be a proper topic for psychology until James (1890) resurrected the concept from the realms of philosophy. As with the philosophers of his day, James wrestled with the objective and subjective nature of the 'self – and 'me' and the 'I' – and eventually concluded that it was perfectly reasonable for the psychologist to study the 'self' as an objective phenomenon. He envisaged the infant developing from 'one big blooming buzzing confusion' to the eventual adult state of self-consciousness. The process of development throughout life can be considered, therefore, as a process of becoming more and more aware of one's own characteristics and consequent feelings about them. We see the *self-concept* as an umbrella term (see Figure 1.1) because subsumed beneath the 'self' there are three aspects: self-image (what the person is); ideal self (what the person would like to be); and self-esteem (what the person feels about the discrepancy between what he/she is and what he/she would like to be).

To understand the umbrella nature of the term readers might like to ask themselves the question, 'Who am I?', several times. When first asked, the answer is likely to be name and perhaps sex. When asked a second time the person's job or occupation may be given. The self-image is being revealed so far. Further questioning will lead to the need to reveal more of the person and, in so doing, the ideal self and the self-esteem. For example, 'I am a confident person' (self-esteem); 'l would like to be able

to play cricket' (ideal self).

Each of the three aspects of self-concept will be considered in turn. Underpinning this theoretical account of the development of self-concept will be the notion that it is the child's *interpretation* of the life experience which determines self-esteem levels. This is known as the phenomenological approach and owes its origin mainly to the work of Rogers (1951). It attempts to understand a person through empathy with that person and is based on the premise that it is not the events which determine emotions but rather the person's interpretation of the events. To be able to understand the other person requires, therefore, an ability to empathize.
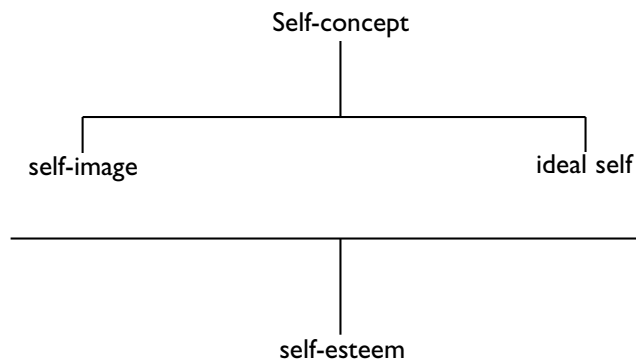
Self-concept

self-image   ideal self

self-esteem

Figure 1.1 *Self-concept as an umbrella term*

SELF-IMAGE

Self-image is the individual's awareness of his/her mental and physical characteristics. It begins in the family with parents giving the child an image of him/herself of being loved or not loved, of being clever or stupid, and so forth, by their non-verbal as well as verbal communication. This process becomes less passive as the child him/herself begins to initiate further personal characteristics. The advent of school brings other experiences for the first time and soon the child is learning that he/she is popular or not popular with other children. He/she learns that school work is easily accomplished or otherwise. A host of mental and physical characteristics are
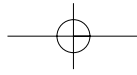
learned according to how rich and varied school life becomes. In fact one could say that the more experiences one has, the richer is the self-image.

The earliest impressions of self-image are mainly concepts of *body-image.* The child soon learns that he/she is separate from the surrounding environment. This is sometimes seen amusingly in the young baby who bites its foot only to discover through pain that the foot belongs to itself. Development throughout infancy is largely a process of this further aware-ness of body as the senses develop. The image becomes more precise and accurate with increasing maturity so that by adolescence the individual is normally fully aware not only of body shape and size, but also of his/her attractiveness in relation to peers.

Sex-role identity also begins at an early age, probably at birth, as par-ents and others begin their stereotyping and classifying of the child into one sex or the other. With cognitive development more refined physical and mental skills become possible, including reading and sporting pur-suits. These are usually predominant in most schools so that the child soon forms an awareness of his/her capabilities in these areas.
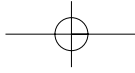
This process of development of the self-image has been referred to as the 'looking-glass theory of self' (Cooley, 1902) as most certainly the indi-vidual is forming his/her self-image as he/she receives feedback from oth-ers. However, the process is not wholly a matter of 'bouncing *off* the environment' but also one of 'reflecting *on* the environment' as cognitive abilities make it possible for individuals to reflect on their experiences and interpret them.

Self-image is our starting point for an understanding of self-esteem.

IDEAL SELF

Side by side with the development of self-image the child is learning that there are ideal characteristics he/she should possess – that there are ideal standards of behaviour and particular skills which are valued. For example, adults place value on being clean and tidy, and 'being clever' is important. As with self-image, the process begins in the family and continues on entry to school. Once they attend school they would normally learn that teach-ers also value the kind of behaviour valued by their parents. Not only are
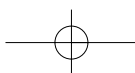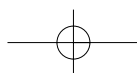
they praised for behaving appropriately, but they also receive rewards and positive feedback from their teachers when they learn to read and to write. In this way, praise becomes a goal and provides them with motivation for further appropriate behaviour and achievements.

Further development of the ideal self occurs as children come into contact with the standards and values of people outside the family and the school. The child is becoming aware of the mores of the society. Body-image, again, is one of the earliest impressions of the ideal self as parents comment on the shape and size of their child. Soon the child is comparing him/herself with others and eventually with peers. Peer comparisons are particularly powerful at adolescence. The influence of the media also becomes a significant factor at this time with various advertising and show-business personalities providing models of aspiration. Role models in the media often have a powerful influence although it is usually the people closest to them that continue to have the strongest influence. However, it is the positive qualities of empathy and respect for others, and a sense of personal responsibility that ought to be the ideal goals of people in a civilized society. So the ideal self does not merely comprise the values and standards of the person's immediate social group but, rather, the ideals and standards of a larger civilized society.

With maturity a person's total experiences are able to be evaluated more realistically, although it is doubtful whether a person ever becomes sufficiently mature to be completely uninfluenced. Our early experiences may continue to influence our present behaviour to some extent although we all have the potential for becoming self-determinate. The schoolchild is most likely to be at the stages of accepting these ideal images from the significant people around him/her and of striving to a greater or lesser degree to attain them.

SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is the individual's *evaluation* of the discrepancy between self-image and ideal self. From the discussion on the development of self-image and ideal self it can be appreciated that the discrepancy between the two is inevitable and so can be regarded as a normal phenomenon.
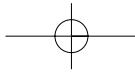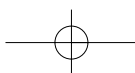
Self-esteem can be either global or specific and there is a relationship between these two facets of self-esteem. Global self-esteem refers to an all-round feeling of self-worth and confidence. Specific self-esteem refers to a feeling of self-worth and confidence with regard to a specific activity or behaviour.
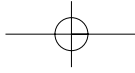
If a particular activity or behaviour is valued, the chances are that eventually it will affect a person's global self-esteem. For instance, a child may have an overall feeling of positive self-worth, that is, high global self-esteem, but feel inadequate when having to play sport. If sport is highly valued in this school, their global self-esteem will be threatened. However, if sport is not valued in their school, their global self-esteem may remain unaffected. Even if a regular activity such as sport is valued and the child fails at this, it should still be possible to maintain high self-esteem by avoiding sport. This strategy of avoiding specific activities is more easily accomplished in adult life than in the school situation. It is difficult to avoid school activities, especially when they are so often compulsory. An example of such an activity would be learning to read.

In the process of normal development there is always a discrepancy between self-image and ideal self. It is this discrepancy that motivates people to change or to develop social, physical and academic skills. However, in some cases, adults might be anxious about their child's slow progress. They may communicate their disapproval of the fact that the child has not yet reached their ideal. Sadly, the child usually interprets this criticism as not just disapproval over their failure in the activity concerned but disapproval of them as a person. Consequently, these children also become extremely anxious about their failure to meet the adult's standards and, so, their global self-esteem drops.

Indeed, there is evidence from clinical work that without this discrepancy – without levels of aspiration – individuals can become apathetic and poorly adjusted. Just as in physiology the nerve impulse is always active so, it seems, the psyche also needs to be active. It is a mistake to think that the ideal state is one of total relaxation. Whilst this may be desirable for a short while, in the long run it can produce neurotic behaviour. For the person to be striving is therefore a normal state.

What is not normal is that the individual should worry and become dis-

tressed over the discrepancy. Clearly, this is going to depend in early child-hood on how the significant people in the child's life react to him/her. For instance, if the parent is overanxious about the child's development this will soon be communicated and the child, too, will also become overanxious about it. He/she begins first by trying to fulfil the parental expectations, but if he/she is not able to meet them begins to feel guilty.

It is interesting that the young child is so trusting in the adults that he/she does not consider that they could be wrong or misguided. When a child fails to live up to parental expectations he/she blames him/herself at first, feeling unworthy of their love. Moreover, this failure in a particular area generalizes so that he/she would not just feel a failure, say, in reading attainment, but will feel a failure as a person generally. The child is not able to compartmentalize his/her life as can the adult. If we adults cannot play chess, for instance, we avoid the chess club. If the child fails in, say, reading, he/she cannot avoid the situation.

Indeed, the subject of reading is probably the most important skill he/she will learn in the primary school and normally will come into con-tact with reading every day of school life. It is not surprising therefore that the child who fails in reading over a lengthy period should be seen to have developed low self-esteem, the end product of feeling guilt about his/her failure. The child then lacks confidence in him/herself.

It can be appreciated from the foregoing description of the develop-ment of self-concept that teachers are in a very strong position to be able to influence self-esteem. It should be pointed out perhaps at this juncture that not all children who fail in school work will have low self-esteem. Those parents, and sometimes those teachers, who put no pressure at all on the child to achieve will not, of course, be worrying the child over his/her failure. But at the same time, without some demands being made on the child, he/she will not likely be achieving.

The rule is: unrealistic demands may result in low self-esteem, but no demands at all may result in no achievement. Clearly, there must be an optimum amount of pressure – just enough to cause the child to care but not too much so that he/she becomes distressed. The secret is to be aware of the child's present level of functioning so that our demands to extend this level will be realistic. In the area of language development, for
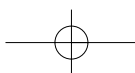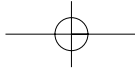
instance, we should not normally expect our child to be able to use a long, complex sentence structure until his/her span of attention and memory-span have developed sufficiently to be able to retain it. It can be appreciated at once that the child's present level of functioning in any area is likely to depend on a complex interrelatedness of many factors. Only an intimate knowledge of the child will give us this information.

It is not the failure to achieve that produces low self-esteem; it is the way the significant people in the child's life react to the failure. Indeed, it could be argued that failure is an inevitable part of life and, indeed, trial-and-error learning can be an effective method of learning in certain circumstances. Failure need not be feared. After all, there is always someone cleverer or more skilled than ourselves. This must be accepted if we are to help children develop happily without straining always to be on top. Eventually, of course, children become aware of their own level of achievement and realize that they are not performing as well as others around them. Then they can develop low self-esteem irrespective of the opinions of others; they have set their own standards. It is probably true to say, however, that the primary school child is still likely to be 'internalizing' his/her ideal self from the significant people around him/her. These people, of course, can include peers as well as teachers and family.

Children who have received a realistic self-image and an ideal self that are consistent with the mores of their particular society should arrive at school with high self-esteem. They will have confidence in themselves, be emotionally and socially well adjusted and eager for new experiences.

■ HOW SELF-ESTEEM OPERATES ■

The child with high self-esteem is likely to be confident in social situations and in tackling school work. He/she will have retained a natural curiosity for learning and will be eager and enthusiastic when presented with a new challenge.

The child with low self-esteem, in contrast, will lack confidence in his/her ability to succeed. Consequently, he/she may try to avoid situations which he/she sees as potentially personally humiliating. In the words of
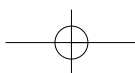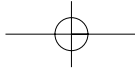
the famous philosopher and psychologist, William James (1890), 'With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure no humiliation'. This explains why some students prefer to do nothing even though knowing they are likely to incur the teacher's displeasure. To be punished and perhaps be seen as something of a hero by their peers is better than to be seen to be foolish.

AVOIDANCE AND COMPENSATION

Depending on whether the child is by temperament inclined to extroversion or introversion, he/she will meet the situation with avoidance or an attempt to compensate. If inclined to extroversion he/she is more likely to compensate and fight back at the source of the frustration. So we can have the child who is arrogant and boastful on the surface, and so giving an impression of anything but low self-esteem. At its extreme this would be the classical 'inferiority complex', a phrase first used by Jung (1923). On the other hand, if introverted by temperament, the child is more likely to withdraw and demonstrate the shy, timid behaviour which common sense immediately tells us is an indication of low self-esteem.

In both cases the child is avoiding the feeling of failure. Clearly, if he/she avoids work the teacher is going to be alerted, but more often than not, this then takes the form of exhorting the child to 'get down and do some work' or even a mental note that 'this child is lazy'. It can be appreciated, however, that the child is merely communicating that he/she would rather risk the wrath of the teacher than suffer the feeling of humiliation which he/she sees as the inevitable consequence of tackling new work.

The question is: why is humiliation so terrible and to be avoided at all costs? To answer this question we turn to the humanistic psychologists, of whom the best known, perhaps, is Carl Rogers (1961). Carl Rogers has drawn our attention to the prime need in our culture for self-regard. In a society where generally people no longer starve, and where primitive drives are easily expressed, it seems that our most important need is to preserve self-esteem. Whether this is innate or learned does not matter. We all need to be liked and to be valued. When we cannot fulfil this need easily we
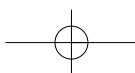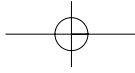
tend to identify this with material things which we know will be admired and so set out to possess as large a car or as large a house as we can. Or, we may divert this need into our children, not just by basking in their achievement, but sometimes misguidedly living out our own lives through them.

MOTIVATION

A second phenomenon of the self-concept is that it is a motivator. We all tend to behave in ways which fit in with our perception of ourselves. Indeed, we can feel decidedly insecure when we are expected to behave in a manner which we might regard as 'not me'. One example of this would be the shy, low self-esteem child who is suddenly called upon to read the address at the school assembly in front of perhaps 400 others. Consider also the student teacher facing a class for the first time. Both are going to feel very anxious indeed.

> MOTIVATOR. This term, in reference to the self-concept, implies that the self-concept determines the direction of a person's behaviour. For instance, a child whose self-concept tells them that they are good readers will be attracted to a library. The child whose self-concept tells them that they are poor readers will tend to avoid a library.

At a less dramatic level, but none the less important, is the retarded reader who daydreams during the school library sessions. He/she does not see reading as relevant to his/her self-concept. Reading is for the 'clever ones'. Even though the child may comply with the teacher's demand to read he/she would just 'go through the motions' of reading without really being highly motivated. This would mean, of course, that any learning which did take place would not be retained in the long term. This child can baffle the teacher as he/she seems to learn in the short term. In addition he/she seems to possess all the skills necessary to make progress. Often, these children score well in intelligence tests and show no perceptual difficulties, neither do they show overt signs of emotional disturbance. However, without attention to their low self-esteem they are not likely to make long-term progress.
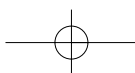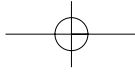
RESISTANCE

A third important feature of self-concept is that it tends to be resistant to change. This means that we cannot reasonably expect our failing reader suddenly to see him/herself as a potentially good reader, even with therapeutic intervention. It can be quite threatening for a child with learning difficulties to be informed that he/she will soon be 'clever' and be able to read. It needs to be a gradual process.

It seems that it is just 'human nature' to want to maintain self-consistency. It is quite startling to meet people with the most severe of handicaps desperately clinging to their handicaps in the face of a possible change. We need to know who we are, and the familiar is safer than the unfamiliar even if known to be inadequate. The hearing-impaired person may resist at first any surgery which can restore the hearing merely because of the risk to self-concept. This is not meant to suggest he/she would not eventually go through with an operation but it is not an easy decision to make when it also means changing the self-concept.

The low self-esteem person is even more resistant to change as it means taking risks which he/she cannot easily do in the sense of either learning new skills or being a different person. Any remedial approach to the child with a learning difficulty should therefore take this factor into account.

■ THE SELF-ESTEEM HIERARCHY ■

The question often posed is 'Can we have low self-esteem in one situation and high self-esteem in another?' It is only asked by those who have not understood the hierarchical nature of self-esteem (Shavelson *et al.*, 1976).

Self-esteem as defined so far refers to a 'global self-esteem' – an individual's overall feeling of self-worth. This is relatively stable and consistent over time. In addition to this overall, or global, self-esteem we can have feelings of worth or unworthiness in specific situations. Accordingly, we may feel inadequate (low self-esteem) with regard to mathematics or tennis playing. However, they do not affect our overall
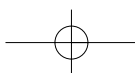
feeling of self-worth as we can escape their influences by avoiding those situations. If, of course, we cannot avoid them and regularly participate in these activities which make us feel inadequate, they may eventually affect our overall self-esteem. Also, if we continue to fail in areas which are valued by the significant people in our lives then our overall self-esteem is affected. It is worth reflecting on how children cannot escape school subjects which is why failure in school so easily generalizes to the global self-esteem.

> GLOBAL SELF-ESTEEM. This term refers to a person's overall feeling of self-worth as opposed to *specific* self-esteem that refers to a person's feeling of self-worth in regard to a specific activity or skill.

It is important to appreciate this hierarchy of self-esteem as confusion often arises when people make statements such as 'Girls have lower self-esteem than boys'. This is not borne out by the research if we are referring to global self-esteem (Marsh *et al.*, 1984), but it is true when referring to mathematics and science. Even here we must be careful to distinguish between statistical significance and practical significance. The research mentioned refers to statistical significance but the differences *within* the sexes are greater so that, practically, we can say there are no real differences between the sexes. Figure 1.2 illustrates the self-esteem hierarchy (Shavelson and Bolus, 1982)
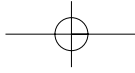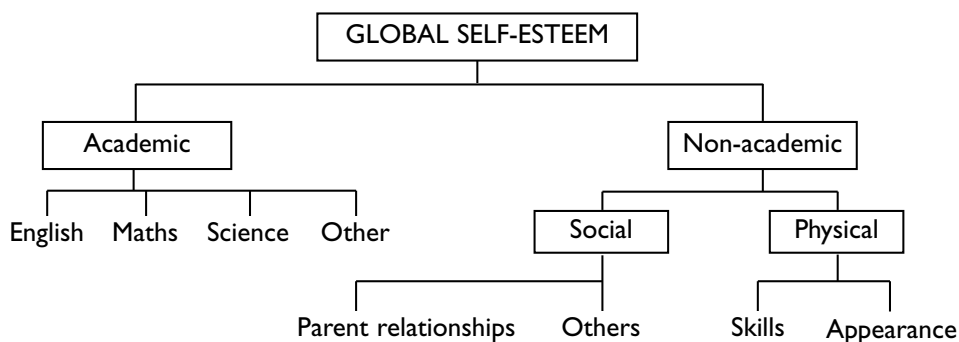

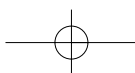**Figure 1.2** *The self-esteem hierarchy*

Summarizing the development of self-esteem, the process begins with interpersonal relationships within the family which gradually give precedence to school influences and to the influences of the larger society in which the individual chooses to live and work. These extraneous influences lose their potency to the extent to which the individual becomes self-determinate. For the child of school age, however, self-esteem continues to be affected mainly by the significant people in the life of the child, usually parents, teachers and peers.

> INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS. This term refers to the face-to-face social interactions that exist between people in a group situation.

> SELF-DETERMINATE. A person who is self-determinate is able to choose to behave in a particular way because they have made an independent decision to do so. This is contrasted with the person who is not self-determinate and whose behaviour is determined for them by other people.

■ THE EVIDENCE FOR SELF-ESTEEM ENHANCEMENT ■

The need to maintain children's self-esteem is self-evident and most teachers are well aware of the importance of the value attached to helping children feel good about themselves. On common-sense grounds one would expect children with high self-esteem to do better in class than children with low self-esteem. And this is supported by the research which consistently shows a positive correlation between children's self-esteem and their levels of attainment. The correlational studies usually reveal a figure around 0.6, which indicates that other factors are also relevant in whether children achieve or not. Obviously, ability is an essential factor in the achievement equation. However, it is clear from the research that children will not use their full ability if their self-esteem is low. This is well documented in research carried out by the author and also in other more recently published research (Rosenburg *et al.*, 1995; Mrak, 1999, Crocker and Wolfe, 2001; Galbraith and Alexander, 2005). Davies and Brember (1999), reporting the results of an eight-year cross-sectional study measur-

ing self-esteem, showed significant correlations between self-esteem and all their attainment scores.

It is over 25 years since the first of a long series of experiments was begun by the author in Somerset, England, into the enhancement of children's self-esteem. The original experiments concluded that teachers were able to enhance children's self-esteem over a six-month period through a systematic programme of individual self-esteem enhancement. This research is discussed in more detail in Appendix 1.

Following these experiments it was hypothesized that the results were a function of the quality of the relationships established and not necessarily dependent on either the academic or professional qualifications of the author. If this were the case it should be possible for non-professionals to obtain the same results. A further series of experiments were then conducted using non-professionals. They were briefed on self-concept theory as outlined above and shown how to organize the sessions.

They were seen to obtain the same results as a professional psychologist. It was becoming clear that the essential ingredient in the process was the communication skills of the people conducting the programme, as discussed in Chapter 9. The conclusion from these experiments was not that teachers or psychologists were unsuited to this task. Indeed, on common-sense grounds, with their training and knowledge of children, they should be even more skilled than non-professionals. The significant conclusion was that no matter what the professional qualifications of the people conducting the programme, they would not be effective unless they also possessed the qualities of personality which the research shows to be essential. Brief details of these experiments are given in Appendix 1.

The results of the above experiments were later translated into workshops for teachers. The author was invited by the Western Australian Government Ministry of Education to conduct self-esteem workshops throughout that state and over 200 schools were eventually served. Following the publication of the results of this research many schools in the United Kingdom began to appreciate the significance of a self-esteem programme.

The research evidence does not point only to the positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement. There is also evidence of

a positive correlation between self-esteem and children's behaviour. It seems that children with high self-esteem are more likely to get on better with others and so have fewer behaviour problems. In the experiments reported, teachers regularly mentioned a reduction in behavioural difficulties amongst those who had been on the self-esteem programme, although this was not the main object of the programme. The self-esteem enhancement programme was more modest in its aims, merely trying to help children change their attitudes towards themselves. Not all children who have low self-esteem have behavioural difficulties. The fact that the self-esteem experiments did not specifically aim to reduce behavioural difficulties is important in highlighting the similarities and differences between a self-esteem programme and one aimed to help children who do show behavioural difficulties. The latter are discussed in more detail in Chapter 10. However, it should be mentioned that research concludes that when a teacher is faced with children showing behavioural difficulties, no matter what sanctions or disciplinary measures the teacher may decide to use, the manner in which they are used is crucial with regard to the child's self-esteem. Also, research concludes that self-esteem enhancement need not by any means be inconsistent with good discipline in the classroom. Children in any context who know where the boundaries to their behaviour lie, and how far they can go, generally feel more secure and are usually of higher self-esteem. The famous research of Stanley Coopersmith (1967) into behaviour and attitudes, although conducted over 25 years ago, is just as valid today.

Self-esteem enhancement does not mean always that focus has to be on helping children feel good about themselves. Some children are so immature that they are still relatively unconscious of themselves and often the best way to help them is to try to help them become more aware of their behaviour. Ask these children why they behaved in a particular way and they usually answer 'I don't know'. This can infuriate the adult asking the question but it is generally the case that they genuinely do not know. For them any programme of self-esteem enhancement should be postponed until they are aware of a self to be enhanced. Perhaps one of the most startling of research findings is the conclusion that there is a correlation between children's self-esteem and teacher self-esteem. Children of
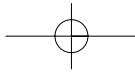
high self-esteem who are in regular contact with teachers of low self-esteem will gradually themselves develop low self-esteem, with associated low attainment levels. On a more positive note, the converse can also occur, with low self-esteem children raising their self-esteem through regular contact with high self-esteem teachers (Burns, 1982).

It is clear from all the research that teachers are in a powerful position to influence children's self-esteem and in turn influence their achievements and behaviour. Perhaps most teachers are already aware of this, and probably already enhance children's self-esteem intuitively. However, a knowledge of the research, together with familiarity with self-concept theory would provide teachers with a proper rationale so that they are in a position to know how to go about enhancing self-esteem systematically.

The research would suggest that teachers can enhance self-esteem in three ways:

1. Through a systematic programme of group activities lasting usually a term. These are described in Chapters 7 and 8.

2. Through an individual self-esteem enhancement programme. This is discussed further in Chapter 9.

3. Through providing a positive ethos in the classroom. This is probably the most usual way in which teachers influence children's self-esteem. This is the method which is more likely to be done on an intuitive basis. The self-esteem and communication skills of the teacher are the significant factors in this process, as discussed in Chapter 6. Teachers can either reduce or enhance children's self-esteem according to how they manage the general ethos of the classroom.

Self-esteem enhancement does not have to take the form of a systematic programme. The opinion has been expressed in some quarters that teachers do not always have time for self-esteem enhancement. This view is based on a false premise of what self-esteem enhancement is about. All teaching should be carried out within a generally self-esteem enhancing framework. This means the teacher establishing positive relationships with the children in their care. Suggestions and guidance for establishing positive relationships in the classroom are discussed in Chapter 6.
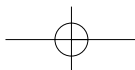
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