



## Mind Over Media: Developing a strong and confident sense of self

Many elements go to make up a strong and confident sense of self. Children feel good about themselves when they are physically healthy and know they are loved and appreciated. From an early age they strive to achieve and as they experience mastery of more and more skills, their self esteem blossoms. Most preschoolers describe themselves in terms of their physical attributes, possessions, things they are able to do and things that interest them. At this stage they are also developing their gender identity and a sense of social responsibility.

### Developing self-confidence and the media

The way children perceive themselves is largely derived from their relationships and interactions with others, particularly their perception of what important people in their lives think of them. Too much media input at the expense of interaction with caregivers can interfere with that development. If used in moderation, good quality media can help preschoolers with their developing sense of self by supporting their interests and providing them with challenges. On the other hand, some media, particularly television advertisements can erode self esteem as they convince children that 'having' or particularly for girls 'looking a certain way' is more important than 'doing', 'achieving' or even just 'being'.

### Infants (0–1 years)

The most important developmental need of an infant is secure attachment to their primary caregivers. If infants feel loved and have their needs met, a solid foundation for the development of self confidence at a later age will be laid. (See YMA's Fact Sheet *Mind Over Media: Developing Healthy Relationships* for more detail on this topic.)

### Infants, the media and the development of self confidence

Generally infants will only pay attention to television for short periods of time, and if there is nothing else to do. At three months of age, if an adult physically directs them towards a television set, they will pay attention, but it seems to demand a great effort as what they are viewing often 'cuts' quickly from scene to scene, or pans faster than they can follow. In one study, almost all of the infants who looked at a television for at least half of a six minute cartoon presentation, later showed signs of tiredness, such as crying, fussiness and yawning (Josephson, 1995).

At six months of age, infants can direct their own attention to the TV, and maintain that attention for as long as 16 minutes. However, generally there are more interesting things to do, and if provided with other opportunities for play and interaction, the infant will choose this over the option of television.

To maximise the opportunities for an infant to engage in activities that they find enjoyable and manageable, it is best to follow the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (1999) recommendation of no TV for under twos.

*Here are a few strategies that will help:*

- Minimise the exposure of children under the age of two to electronic media.
- If you are watching TV yourself while your infant is in the room, make sure there are plenty of toys and other distractions within your infant's reach so that they can entertain themselves and practise their emerging skills of grasping, turning and moving objects, the beginnings of mastery
- Always be mindful that your infant's primary need is to feel loved and cared for by you. If you are absorbed in a particular program, it

might be best to tape it rather than miss emotional cues from your infant, or feel frustrated when they 'interrupt' you.

## Toddlers (1–3 years)

Toddlers are aware that they are a separate person from their caregivers, so asserting and testing this independence is crucial to their developing sense of worth. Positive and encouraging reactions to toddlers' achievements are vital in building self esteem for the future. Acknowledging that they are valued just for who they are is important too, by listening carefully to their stories, and helping them name and express their interests and characteristics. Toddlers generally enjoy playing with other children of about the same age, and are learning how to get along with others. Tantrums can emerge at this age, as toddlers feel the frustration of not being able to communicate as well as they would like, and having their wishes frustrated as they learn the boundaries of their independence.

### Toddlers, the media and the development of self confidence

Toddlers will sit and watch television for longer periods of time, pay attention to what they are seeing, imitate and extract meaning from the content.

#### Sense of empowerment

Children of this age need to experience success in their efforts to do things for themselves. Opportunities need to be provided to allow them to experiment and achieve this success. The passivity of television watching does not provide an environment to assist toddlers with this task, so time spent just watching television should be kept to a minimum. Some programs suggest activities for toddlers that are manageable and can provide ideas for caregivers. Likewise, some computer programs, chosen carefully, may provide toddlers with opportunities to master simple skills.

#### Showing respect for others

It is important to expose toddlers to media that supports their developing social skills, and models collaborative and cooperative practices. Violent media, even comical, can confuse children of this age, as it conflicts with the messages they are learning from caregivers that it is not ok to hit or slap. As great imitators, exposure to violent media increases the likelihood that they will be violent themselves.

### Advertising erodes self esteem

Toddlers will start paying attention to advertising on television, and although they may be able to name them as advertisements, do not yet have the ability to distinguish their purpose. Food advertising can be particularly damaging, as it leads them to believe that fatty, salty, sugary food is good for them and more fun to eat than other more nutritional foods. Setting good early eating habits is important in the prevention of childhood obesity.

### Television as emotional support

Television can be used to calm a frustrated toddler or provide 'down-time' after a busy day. However, over-reliance on TV and other media in such times, risks limiting the toddler's range of options for dealing with emotions. Learning self-regulation is an important part of the older child's sense of competence and they will learn this by interacting with a responsive caregiver who helps them label their emotions and work out strategies for dealing with them. While watching TV may distract and mute emotions, it cannot teach these important lessons.

*Here are a few strategies that will help:*

- Limit total screen time to one hour per day. Provide opportunities for your toddler to master new skills.
- Watch *Play School* or *In the Box* with your toddler and encourage them to practise the skills they have seen.
- A strength of *The Teletubbies* is its valuing of each 'character's' interests and qualities, and that they are being happy just by being themselves.
- Programs such as *Sesame Street* and *Bananas in Pyjamas* show characters treating each other with respect, solving problems by talking about them and helping each other.
- Avoid all violent media, including cartoons and other slapstick violence.
- Avoid commercial television, as it can erode your child's self esteem. In particular, take steps to minimise your toddler's exposure to food advertisements.
- Have a variety of tactics up your sleeve to calm or your toddler, or help them relax, rather than building an early reliance on TV or videos for this purpose. For example, read them a story or make use of a relaxing music tape. Make TV the last resort not the first.

## Preschoolers (3–5 years)

Preschoolers are extending their self knowledge all the time and undertaking more complex developmental tasks in the area of developing a sense of self. Developing their gender identity, free from stereotypes and rigid gender divisions is important as their sense of social responsibility and morality becomes more sophisticated.

### Preschoolers, the media and the development of self confidence

Preschoolers will watch television with an 'exploration' approach and actively seek meaning from what they are seeing.

#### Gender identity

Good quality television made for preschoolers can assist children in developing gender identity by showing both male and female characters as having a diverse range of characteristics and interests. They can provide preschoolers with the opportunity to identify with appropriate role models. Programs, children's or otherwise, that stereotype or devalue on the basis of gender should be avoided.

#### Sense of social responsibility

Imaginary play, including role plays are a valuable way for preschoolers to further develop a sense of the way they can relate to others. Some programs model constructive ways of interacting with others that can be extended in play afterwards.

#### More about commercial television

Preschoolers are even more vulnerable than toddlers to the messages of commercial television. Renowned child psychologist, Steve Biddulph, has described commercial television as "...a direct attack on the self-esteem of children and teenagers" in that its specific purpose is to make children feel that they will only be happy when have the items being advertised.

In her 2004 book, Juliet Schor, economist and Professor of Sociology at Boston College describes kids and teens as being at the ...epicentre of American consumer culture. As children define themselves more and more by the clothes, and the brands, they wear, she describes the 'evidence of distress' "Rates of obesity are at epidemic levels. Diagnoses of attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder have risen dramatically, and record numbers of kids are taking drugs to help them achieve self control and focus...Today's average (i.e. normal) young person

between the ages of nine and seventeen scores as high on anxiety scales as children who were admitted to clinics for psychiatric disorders in 1957".(Schor, 2004, p. ).

The best defence against the negative impact of advertising is for parents to 1.) ConstantlyConstantly remind children, verbally and with their actions, that they are loved exactly as they are and 2.) Minimise their exposure to commercial television and to actively assist children to pursue activities through which they are can have feelings of success and enjoyment.

#### More about food ads

The preschool years is a time when a pattern of being overweight can become established. As with toddlers, preschoolers are susceptible to the message that food advertised on TV is more fun than home-cooked food. Australian children are exposed to even more junk food ads thanthan American or British children, and our rate of childhood obesity has now risen to over 25%. Children can get caught in a vicious cycle; overweight children are shown to be more socially isolated than other children, and self-esteem suffers and they eat more to compensate for this.

*Here are a few media strategies that will help:*

- Select programs made for preschoolers which show a diversity of gender roles. Comment on the characters and what they are doing. For example: To a boy while watching *Bananas in Pyjamas* "Morgan has made some yummy biscuits. Would you like to help me make some after this". Or, to a girl watching *Sesame Street* "Blah is very good at fixing things. Let's get a hammer and some nails and see what we can do"
- Select programs, or hire videos and DVDs, that support the interests of your preschooler, whether it is ballroom dancing, animal shows or programs about pyramids.
- Use favourite television characters to stimulate role plays to solve imaginary or real problems. "How do you think Big Bird would have handled that?"
- Select commercial television for children under the age of five very carefully, and look for programs rated 'P' which have no advertising.
- Share with your children your own amusement that anyone would believe that having 'stuff' makes you worthwhile. Remind

them that being loved is much more important than having things.

- Explain to very young children, that advertisements are just ‘pretend’, not ‘real’. This can lay the foundations for children understanding the selling intent of advertisements as they grow older. See box below “Teach about the fib factor” and list of media literacy websites in the References section.
- Avoid food advertisements. Have clear boundaries about what you will buy that is advertised. Explain to your preschooler that some foods are ‘anytime’ foods and others are ‘sometime’ foods.

## Help your child believe in their own value

*These steps will help strengthen your child against potentially damaging advertising messages*

- Value and accept them as they are. Respond to their unique abilities and interests. Appreciate and accept both their strengths and weaknesses.
- Believe they can do things and show them that you do. “You can reach the ball by yourself. Give it a try.”
- Treat them with respect. It is from your respectful behaviour that they will learn self-respect.
- Don’t compare them with others. True self worth is independent of others.
- Appreciate and comment on your child’s efforts and improvements. “You’re getting better at remembering to wash your hands before dinner.”
- Comment specifically on your child’s positive qualities. “Maybe if you sing to your baby, brother, he’ll have an easier time falling asleep. He likes to hear you sing.”
- Show a genuine interest in areas that interest them, even if they are not so important to you.
- Keep a sense of humour. This can help both you and your child relax.

***Information in the section has been adapted from ASG Parent Briefings, (1997)***

## Neuromarketing—using self image to sell

Neuromarketing is an emerging field where advertisers are joining with scientists to exploit functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology for the purpose of more effective marketing. Images such as Madonna, broccoli, sushi, a golden retriever, Bill Clinton and Coca Cola are flashed before a subject’s eyes and their brain activity monitored. It appears that when subjects see a picture of something they particularly like, their brains show increased activity in the prefrontal cortex, the area associated with sense of self or self-image. One neuroscientist has been quoted “We give companies an insight into how to develop relationships with consumers”

US consumer groups have expressed concern about using brain research in this way. Gary Ruskin, Executive Director of Commercial Alert, a group he co-founded with Ralph Nader states “Any small increase in the effectiveness of advertising can cause tremendous disease, death and human suffering.” He argues that it shouldn’t be made any easier to push unhealthy products that could contribute to obesity, alcoholism or violence. He particularly singles out children as vulnerable advertising targets (Dahlberg, 1994).

## Conclusion

Very young children will learn self confidence as they master new skills and learn to relate successfully to their peers. The best way for them

to do this is to participate actively in the world around them.

Although some quality children’s programs or videos can support the development of appropriate social skills and gender identity and reinforce interests, care needs to be taken to avoid commercial television whose ads can erode children’s sense of self esteem and all violent media which disrupts the development of appropriate social responsibility.

## References

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (1999) *Television — How It Affects Children* [Viewed 14 September 2005] ([www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm](http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm))

Australian Scholarship Group (ASG) Parent Briefings (1997) (still tracking down correct referencing)

Berk, LE (2003). *Child development*, (6th ed.). (Boston: Allyn & Bacon)

Dahlberg CP (2004), "Marketers see riches in brain data" (*The Sacramento Bee*, 6 February 2004)

Josephson, WL (1995) *Television Violence: A review of the effects on children of different ages* (Canadian Heritage: Canada)

Meltz, BF (2004) "Teach about the fib factor" (*The Boston Globe*, 11 March 2004)

Schor JB (2004) *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (Scribner: US)

Wahlberg D (2004) "Advertisers probe brains, raise fears" (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 2 January 2004)

### **Media literacy websites for parents**

Media Education Foundation - [mediaed.org](http://mediaed.org)

Center for Media Literacy - [medialit.org](http://medialit.org)

Action Coalition for Media Educators - [acmecoalition.org](http://acmecoalition.org)

Jean Kilbourne - [JeanKilbourne.com](http://JeanKilbourne.com)

American Academy of Pediatrics - [aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm](http://aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm)