



More than ever parents feel burdened to raise kids who are brave, resilient, and kind. This book sees beneath the surface of our children's struggles to the heart attitudes that determine kids' thoughts and actions. Jill provides evidence-based solutions for raising children of character.

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Choose Self-Respect, Forget Self-Esteem

STRONG, adj. *Having ability to bear or endure; firm; solid; as a constitution strong enough to bear the fatigues of a campaign.*¹

My father was not a healthy man during my high school years. Medicine bottles lined the ledge over the fireplace in the living room. Each time he took a pill, he flipped the bottle upside down to maintain a daily regimen of treatment prescribed by his doctor.

Daddy listened to those in charge of his care and followed their orders as best he could. His hope was to find his way back to health, to find a way to reverse the disease attacking his ever-weakening heart to make it strong again.

I've never forgotten the day Daddy came home from the pharmacy with a fresh refill only to discover the new pills weren't the same as the previous prescription. He was "dog mad," grabbed his keys, and headed back to town to take a bite out of the person in charge.

I waited for Daddy's return. More than an hour later, he pulled in the driveway. I greeted him at the door. "Daddy, did you get the medicine straightened out?" I asked.

"Yep," he replied.

“Everything’s fine now?” I asked.

“Nope,” Daddy said. “When I confronted the pharmacist, he admitted I was right. There had been a mistake. The pill I had been taking for six weeks was the wrong medicine.”

I was aghast.

Of all the pill bottles sitting on the mantel, the medicine Daddy needed most to control the buildup of fluid around his heart had been incorrectly dispensed. No wonder that rather than improving, his health had been deteriorating by the day.

Even though Daddy followed the advice of his doctors, someone who played a critical role in his care had made a dreadful mistake.

Two weeks later Daddy left this earth for his heavenly home.

Why do I share such a difficult story? Just as the wrong medicine dispensed to Daddy did not cure him but hurt him, we have been taking the wrong medicine to cure the ills of our society since the 1960s. Psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden adopted William James’s theory of self-esteem from the late 1800s and published a seminal work in 1969 titled *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*,² in which he promoted the concept of loving oneself.

During the same time period, Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, promoted the idea of “unconditional positive regard,” a technique he intended as a means for helping kids cope with feelings of inadequacy in the eyes of their parents when they failed to meet certain goals.³

Both Branden and Rogers believed the answers we needed to find our way out of the tumultuous ’60s would be found in the building of self-esteem.⁴ I believe it was the wrong prescription that has nearly destroyed two generations and is now threatening to destroy another.

I know most of you reading this only know what you know about the ’60s from what you’ve read or been told by parents and grandparents

who lived through it. Or you're a fan of the iconic music. Or you love the vintage style of clothing and décor.

The political upheaval, rioting in the streets, lawlessness, confusion, and social unrest that characterize today were present then too. Along with the Vietnam War, Woodstock, President Kennedy's assassination, and the rise of the counterculture, the '60s were not unlike what we experience today in the 2020s—with one grand exception.

In the '60s, the self-esteem movement was in its infancy, accepted as a solution to the troubles of that decade's young people. Today, it is widely viewed as an essential component of mental health.⁵ The truth that self-esteem was introduced to our society in the late 1800s by psychiatrist William James as a theory of human development has been forgotten.

Let's look at the results of this thinking.

Self-Esteem as the “Cure”

It's true. Parents who were Baby Boomers themselves did what they were told. By the late 1970s, many Boomer parents had bought into the self-esteem movement and began smothering their children with attention. Lavishing gifts for every A and praising children for even small achievements became commonplace. Most of all, making sure their children were happy, first and foremost, was established as the new goal of successful parenting.

As a Baby Boomer parent myself, I can testify that many of us entertained our children without training them. We took care of their lives, so our children didn't learn to take care of themselves. I have often said we didn't help our children develop two legs to stand on, so too many have needed crutches to stand.

Frank Stephenson, cultural analyst, noted, “By 1985, a tidal wave of

self-esteem awareness was breaking over nearly every cultural beachhead in the land. Suddenly, the ‘me’ generation was in full swing, swaying to the mantra of self-worth at any cost.”⁶

Parents of the 1980s did all of this so their children would feel special. As the self-esteem movement continued to take hold into the ’90s,⁷ every kid got a trophy or a ribbon or a citation or a something just for standing where they were told, but even the children could sense the fraudulence. After an end-of-the-year baseball party for a team of ten-year-olds, one of my sons jumped in the backseat and threw his trophy on the floorboard. When I suggested he should be appreciative of his award, he retorted, “Mom, I don’t deserve a trophy. I didn’t do anything but stand out there. I don’t want it.”

Worst of all, while more and more parents became obsessed with making their children feel special, with society supporting their obsession, they were failing to ground their children in truth.

In the ’90s, relativism was allowed to sneak in under the guise of building children’s self-esteem because it’s hard to teach truth when you’re caught up in a lie. How do you find time to teach Proverbs when you’re busy making sure your child will have the right activities on their college application?

How do you teach children to cooperate with each other when you’re worried about your child beating out the other kids in their grade for the best scholarship?

The character Dash from Pixar’s *Incredibles* film drives home this point when he gets in trouble at school for using his superpowers to play pranks on his teacher. On the car ride home, Dash defends himself to his mother by saying, “Our powers make us special,” to which his mom, Mrs. Incredible, responds, “Everyone is special, Dash.” Dash snaps back, “Which is another way of saying that no one is.”⁸

Now, the Millennials, the first generation of self-esteem-filled adults, are raising Gen Z and Gen Alpha.* They're filling the days of their children with activities, classes, and lessons. Toddlers are enrolled in tumbling, dance, gymnastics, and soccer. The entertainment of children has risen to a new level. There's music, lights, and action in every minute of every day. Children are responding with over-the-top behavior from the overstimulation of their surroundings. (We'll talk more about this and the following topics in upcoming chapters.)

It's not all bad. Dads are more involved in the lives of their children than ever before. They're at games, going to doctor's appointments, and playing in the backyard, which are good things. But entertainment that's not balanced with training won't meet the heart needs of children.

Let's take a fresh look at an often-quoted Scripture in Proverbs, "Train a child up in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6 KJV). In the original text, "train" is *chanak*, which means to discipline, dedicate, or inaugurate.⁹ The word used for way is *derek*, which means a course for life, road, or journey.¹⁰ To train your child means to equip them for their course in life. To help them find God's purpose for their life.

With all the best intentions of the Boomers, Gen X and Millennials—and subsequent generations—are struggling in ways that could have been avoided. The pursuit of self-esteem led parents to pacify their children, to be more concerned with keeping their children happy than helping their children mature. Because parents gave them all the world had to offer, many became addicted to the world's offerings, finding that fame, fortune, and fun do not ultimately bring fulfillment, only emptiness. Rather than helping children develop strong hearts, too often our society witnesses young hearts broken into pieces.

* To find a detailed description of the generations, as outlined in this book, visit jillgarnercontent.org/generations.

In some ways this was a predictable surprise. Prioritizing anything over the truth found in God's Word will bring struggles. The tenets of the self-esteem movement are not found in Scripture but in the writings of man. We lost sight of the truth that self-esteem was the culprit not the cure for our ills. Statistics reflect the impact of decades of following the prescription for building self-esteem:

- At least one in five youth aged nine to seventeen years currently has a diagnosable mental health disorder that causes some degree of impairment; one in ten has a disorder that causes significant impairment.¹¹
- Between 1999 and 2019, there was a 64 percent increase in the use of antidepressants.¹²
- The most common mental illnesses in adolescents are anxiety, mood, attention, and behavior disorders.¹³
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death in young people aged ten to twenty-four years.¹⁴
- In 2022, over three-quarters of college students (77 percent) experienced moderate to serious psychological distress.¹⁵
- Thirty-five percent of college students were diagnosed with anxiety.¹⁶
- Twenty-seven percent of college students were diagnosed with depression.¹⁷

In the last sixty years, we have swallowed massive doses of self-esteem, and in turn given it to our children. Just as the medicine given to Daddy made his heart weaker, this incorrect diagnosis has made us weaker as individuals and as a society.

The esteeming of self is contrary to the teaching of Scripture, which teaches us to esteem God and to esteem others. The adoption of self-esteem is the root cause of our struggles.

Jennifer Crocker, psychologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, explains further: "Self-esteem has short-term benefits but long-term costs, ultimately diverting people from fulfilling their fundamental human needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy, leading to poor self-regulation and mental and physical health."¹⁸

Take a look at my "Ten Commandments of 'Self-Esteemism'":

1. You shall have no other gods before You.
2. You shall make for Yourself idols in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath.
3. You shall misuse the name of the lord Your god and hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
4. Remember this day by keeping it happy.
5. Dishonor Your father and your mother, so You may live long in the land You give Yourself.
6. You shall not murder unless the Supreme Court declares it justified.
7. You shall have sex in the city, sex in the country, sex anywhere You desire.
8. You shall not steal unless You must possess what You cannot afford.
9. You shall give false testimony against Your neighbor to improve Your feelings of worth.
10. You shall covet Your neighbor's house until You build a house they shall covet.

I mean no disrespect or irreverence of God's Word by this list. Quite the contrary. I hope this shows that self-esteem is the antithesis of scriptural teaching. Unless we abandon the false teaching of self-esteem, another generation—your children's generation—will suffer even greater harm.

If Not Self-Esteem, Then What?

Children don't need self-esteem, they need self-respect. Clear and simple. We were not wired to esteem ourselves. When we raise children to esteem themselves, they short-circuit. Their decision-making process is disjointed and becomes disconnected from reality. They make decisions based in what feels good in the moment rather than what *is* good.

Self-esteem and self-respect can seem synonymous to many. So, let me offer a word picture that I use in parent workshops to clear the fog between self-esteem and self-respect:

It's Saturday night. Two sixteen-year-old girls, independent of each other, are on a date. Sue is filled with self-esteem. Sarah is filled with self-respect.

It's getting late. The movie is over. Friends are gone. The girls are alone with their dates. Each of them receives a proposition. Which girl will make the best decision? Sarah, full of self-respect, or Sue, full of self-esteem?

The answer: Sarah, full of self-respect. (I bet you're nodding your head.)

With little thought and much confidence, Sarah tells her date it's time to go home. He persists. She insists. Sarah stands her ground. He takes her home. End of story.

Sue reluctantly agrees to her date's request because, in the moment, she craves his attention more than she desires to maintain her dignity. For Sue, this is just the beginning of her story.

Monday morning rolls around. The two girls step onto the campus of their high school. Sarah speaks to everyone and asks what they did over the weekend. Sue has a hard time making eye contact. She's wondering who knows what she did.

The inevitable reframing of her self-image begins.

We know now where Sue's self-esteem came from, but where did Sarah's self-respect come from? What did she understand about herself that Sue did not understand? What was the difference in how they were being parented that led to these two drastically different outcomes?

No doubt, Sue's parents believed self-esteem would give their daughter confidence to make good decisions, but those who told Sue's parents to build her self-esteem were wrong. Sue had to have all the attention, even when it was the wrong attention. Sarah's parents, on the other hand, held to an old-fashioned, but not antiquated, parenting philosophy of teaching their daughter to esteem others, which, in the process, developed her self-respect.

Self-Respect as the Real Cure

I'm often challenged by others that self-respect is still a focus on self, but in reality, it's a focus on others. Let me explain.

To open a parenting workshop on the topic of respect, I pose the question, "How do you gain respect?" The most common answers are:

By giving it

By earning it

By expecting it

By demanding it

If I ask you the same question, I suspect your answer would fall somewhere on this list. It is true: to get respect, you must give respect. Respect is gained by esteeming others. Respect cannot be demanded; instead, it is commanded by your attitude, choices, and treatment of others.

Self-esteem and self-respect are not synonyms, but polar opposites. The difference between self-esteem and self-respect is best understood using a mirror and a window for illustration.

Imagine standing in front of a group of friends, holding a mirror in front of your face. As you gaze in the mirror, you only see yourself. You cannot see others in the room through the mirror. You cannot see others looking at you.

When we seek to build our children's self-esteem, we place a mirror in their hands and say, "It's all about you. What you feel and what you want." But we know the longer we gaze into a mirror, the worse things look, don't we? The same is true for children. The longer your child lives in the mirror, the more lost they become in themselves, becoming either self-conceited or self-conscious.

When we put the mirrors down and take children to a window, they see their own reflection, but it's against the backdrop of the world. At the window of self-respect, they catch a glimpse of themselves, but they immediately see past themselves, beyond themselves to the world before them. (We'll dive deeply into raising children in the mirror or at the window in chapter 8.)

David Brooks, a journalist with the *New York Times* and author of *The Road to Character*, describes his realization concerning the need to abandon a philosophy focused on the esteeming of self, and return to the cultivation of self-respect. Brooks writes:

People with character may be loud or quiet, but they do tend to have a certain level of self-respect. Self-respect is not the same as self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-respect is not based on IQ or any of the mental or physical gifts that help get you into a competitive college. It is not comparative. It is not earned by being better than other people at something. It is earned by being better than you used to be, by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. It emerges in one who is morally dependable. Self-respect is produced by inner triumphs, not external ones. It can only be earned by a person who has endured some internal temptation,

who has confronted their own weaknesses and who knows, “Well, if worse comes to worst, I can endure that. I can overcome that.”¹⁹

If you choose to build self-respect in your children, you’ll focus on who your kids are becoming rather than what they will do. You’ll teach them how to serve others rather than waiting to be served. You’ll teach your kids to do their best while working toward goals so they can experience the satisfaction and confidence that a job well done brings.

If you choose to build self-respect in your children, you’ll focus on who your kids are becoming rather than what they will do.

Which Will You Choose?

For more than fifty years, we have sought after, worked toward, and obsessed over self-esteem in the development of children. It has become obvious that this approach has not worked in the home, in the classroom, or in our society.

You have a choice to make in raising your children or impacting the children you serve in your sphere of influence. Will you choose self-esteem or self-respect as your goal? Let’s look at the distinct differences between the outcomes of pursuing the development of self-esteem and self-respect:

Self-esteem

Fleeting happiness
Greediness
Arrogance
Insecurity
Seeking approval
Wanting more
Self-serving

Self-respect

Lasting joy
Gratefulness
Humility
Confidence
Approved
Having enough
Self-giving

Self-esteem cont.

Gives up
Fearful
Self-centered
Self-exaltation
Artificial

Self-respect cont.

Resilient
Brave
Others-centered
Self-forgetfulness
Authentic

We were told if we focused on self-esteem, our children would exude all the qualities in the righthand column. Seems we were duped into believing a lie. Let's take a closer look.

Fleeting Happiness or Lasting Joy

Imagine standing with your child at a crossroads. Looking ahead to the left is a sign with an arrow that reads, "Self-esteem this way." On the path to the right, a sign with an arrow pointing in the opposite direction reads, "Self-respect this way." Just ahead, there is a sharp turn in each path. You can't see where the paths lead.

Looking behind you, you see only a dark forest. No path or opening in the dense plantings. It is obvious that the only option you have is to move forward with your child. The decision to be made is: Which path will you take? There is no path up the middle.

The quest for self-esteem will take your child down a path toward destruction. The quest for self-respect will take your child down a path toward humility, wisdom, and salvation in Christ. My hope is that you will make the right choice for the sake of your child(ren).

Will you choose happiness or joy for your children? Your child experiences something far beyond happiness when he or she discovers their talents and realizes the satisfaction of contributing value to our society. Joy is found in becoming who you were meant to be.

Greediness or Gratefulness

I know what I'm about to share is contrary to what most child experts say, but it is true. Your child was born with a greedy heart. Your toddler didn't *learn* to say, "It's mine," or "I had it first." Both phrases came out of your child's inward-focused heart.

Nicholaus Noles, a developmental psychologist at the University of Louisville, designed a series of studies for two- and three-year-olds who were shown identical toys and told that one was theirs and the other was not. In the first study, the children kept their eye on their own toy when the toys were shuffled. In a second study, the children were asked which toy they liked best, even though the toys were identical. With rare exceptions, the children said they liked "theirs" the best. In a third study, they were shown a block of wood and told it was theirs. An amazing number of children said they liked the block of wood better than the toy that belonged to someone else. They chose a wood block labeled as theirs over a toy that was not.

When questioned why the children would choose as they did, Noles commented, "That's just the way we're wired."²⁰

He is right. The wiring runs from the heart to the frontal cortex, not the other way around. In support of this belief, research from John and Beatrice Lacey that began in the 1960s is resurfacing today in the field of neurocardiology, the study of the heart brain. J. A. Armour asserted in his groundbreaking book, *Neurocardiology*:

These scientific advances illuminate the fact that while we may believe the brain is our decision maker and ruler, the heart is more powerful than we ever imagined—functioning as a sensory organ, hormone-producing gland, and information-processing center.²¹

In *The Heart Speaks*, Mimi Guarneri, medical director of the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine, gives us further evidence of the function of the heart:

Each beat of the heart sends complex signals to the brain and other organs. These heart signals are capable of reaching higher brain centers, ultimately affecting our reasons and choices, our emotions and perceptions. Apparently, the heart has not only its own language but its own mind.²²

Turning to God's Word for clarification on the function of the heart in decision-making, we find in Luke 6:45, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

Therefore, one of your main concerns as a parent should be to break through your child's innate proclivity to greediness found in their hearts to help them find the joy of giving and to experience the deeper satisfaction of making someone else happy rather than being concerned about their own happiness.

Will you choose greediness or gratefulness for your children?

Arrogance or Humility

We were told if we built our child's self-esteem, they would make wise choices. But the converse is true. Our child only becomes self-inflated to the point of arrogance, which leads to difficulty with friendships and relationships and cultivates a disrespectful attitude. A self-esteem-filled child can become aggressive, unkind, and disrespectful to family members, friends, and others in their lives.

Oh, but sweet humility is grown and cultivated from an emphasis on self-respect—that strong soul who isn't concerned with being first, who finds great joy in serving and helping others find their purpose, and delights in watching others learn what they've already learned. They are confident in knowing who they are, who they belong to, and what they stand for.

Which will you choose for your children . . . arrogance or humility? Insecurity or confidence? Self-exaltation or self-forgetfulness?

Fearful or Brave

My youngest granddaughters, at five and six years old, seem to have been born with mermaid tails. They would rather be in the pool than anywhere else. They have no fear of the water. It's a safe place for them. Years before, my son and daughter-in-law had enrolled each of the girls in an infant swim class in case of an accidental fall into the water. Consequently, they love the water.

It has been fun to watch the girls help other children overcome their fear of jumping off the diving board by showing them how to do it. Then waiting for their friend to take the jump. They are great encouragers, with shouts of, "You can do it! Come on, give it a try."

One act of bravery yields another and another. A spirit of fear is replaced with a desire to try new things in many areas of life because a child discovers that being willing to try is all you need to do it.

Which will you choose for your children . . . fearfulness or bravery?

Imitation or Authenticity

Mom and Dad, you can teach your children what you know, but they will learn more from what you model. To truly instill self-respect in your children, you must be a champion of respect. You must strive to be the person you want your children to become. If you want your children to be self-giving, they need to see your acts of benevolence toward others.

If you want your children to be resilient, you must get back up when you're knocked down to show your children how it's done. If you want your children to be content, you must be content. You can never expect more of your children than you do of yourself.

If you have cultivated self-respect within your own heart, you can lead

your children with authenticity, which will lead them down the right path.

Which will you choose for your children . . . to be an imitation or the real thing?

Making It Real

Before I begin a parenting seminar, I often hear the following comment from a frustrated parent: “I’m doing what I was told to do, but it’s just not working.”

I usually nod in agreement. “I know, believe me, I know. You’ve been doing the best you could do under the circumstances. It’s not your fault. You were given bad advice.”

It is true. We’ve been following popular parenting advice for the last sixty years. Rather than raising a generation of well-adjusted, mature adults, we’ve raised a generation of adults who want someone to take care of them; while they play in the pigpen, we shake our heads in bewilderment.

This makes me think of a mom screaming at her rebellious teenage daughter in total disgust, “After all I’ve done for you, this is the thanks I get?”

If the disturbed teen could articulate what her heart is feeling, she would respond, “Mom, don’t you see? This quest for my self-esteem has ruined me. I don’t know how to take care of myself. I don’t know how to get along. I don’t know anything about life, Mom.”

We entertained them without training them. The result has been devastating, evidenced by our fractured culture. Gerald Vann offers a good explanation, “When self-esteem is high, self-knowledge is very small.”²³ My hope and prayer is that you will choose self-respect for your children and family.

In the chapters that follow, I will do my best to help you succeed in raising your children and teaching the children in your life to

become StrongHearts, morally fit kids, grounded in truth and fortified with self-respect, who have not only head knowledge to lead, but heart knowledge to lead in the right direction, as they become all God created them to be.

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