

Weekly Column

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Living with Children

John Rosemond

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A fellow, slightly upset at my recent series of columns dealing with the myriad of stupid parenting ideas that came out of the 1960s, accuses me of painting with too broad a brush. Without being very specific, he says that some of the parenting changes fashioned during that decade were worthwhile. What?

In the 1960s, American parents stopped going to their elders for advice and began going instead to mental health professionals—people like me. To create a devoted client base, we had to come up with something new. So we cut from whole cloth a nouveau philosophy that was 180 degrees removed from the philosophy that had successfully guided every previous generation of parents. The centerpiece of this new point of view was the notion that high self-esteem is a good thing and that parents should do all in their power to make sure their children acquire it.

Mind you, we made this up. Absolutely no empirical evidence, obtained by scientific means, existed to support this claim. It just sounded good; therefore, it was easy to market. High self-esteem is the card that supports the house of cards that is what I call Postmodern Psychological Parenting. Pull that card and the whole stack falls.

The supposed merits of high self esteem were sold on the basis of rhetoric, not evidence. The evidence, however belated, is now in, and the evidence says high self esteem isn't the Holy Grail it was promoted as being. People with high self regard, says the evidence, possess low regard for others. Instead of seeking opportunities to serve others, they seek to manipulate others. Furthermore, people with high self regard tend to antisocial behavior. People incarcerated in maximum security prisons have very high self regard, for example.

Pre-psychological parenting emphasized respect for others. People with high other-regard seek opportunities to serve; therefore, they pay attention to other people. People with high self esteem want to be served and paid attention to. It's the simple difference between wanting to do for others and wanting others to do for you—obligation versus entitlement. So, to the question, "Isn't it possible for a child to have high self-esteem and a high level respect for others?" the answer is an unequivocal no.

Because high self-esteem has become even more American than the flag and apple pie, what I say on the subject produces what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. Parents become confused, even angry. The most common protest: "But I want my child to be confident!" There is no evidence that people who are humble, modest, and possess high regard for others lack the belief they are capable of dealing with life's challenges. The Amish do not value or promote high self esteem (they call it "being prideful") and they don't think there's a problem they can't solve (and you'd be hard pressed to identify one they haven't solved).

Self esteem doesn't pass the commonsense test either. Would you

rather (be employed by, work alongside, be close friends with, be married to) a person with high self-esteem or a person who is humble and modest? See what I mean? Your commonsense knows the truth, the way things really are. (And make no mistake, high self-esteem and humility do not coexist.) The problem is that America's parenting commonsense has been all but smothered by a big wet blanket of psychobabble that was manufactured in, yep, the 1960s.

So, since belief in high self-esteem is essential to believing in the whole of Postmodern Psychological Parenting, I maintain that the latter is completely devoid of value. It is a sham, a pig in a poke, an intellectual rip-off. It has damaged children, families, schools, and culture. I propose, therefore, that we begin the invigorating, rejuvenating process of finding our way back home.

Family psychologist John Rosemond answers parents' questions on his website at www.rosemond.com.