Low Self-Esteem in Children with Autism:
What are the Causes and Effects of Low Self-Esteem on Autistic Children?

FAIHAN ALOTAIBI
Special Educational Needs at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract:

This study aims to answer the question of how low self-esteem can occur in autistic children and analyse the various effects that it can have. In doing so, it aims to provide suggestions on how the situation could be improved, through strategies for improving individual self-esteem, and ways of facilitating autism-friendly schools in the hope of further improving self-esteem. The links between issues associated with self-esteem will be used to draw conclusions and form a critical view of the situation. A self-reflection on self-esteem will highlight how it can affect people and how it can be improved. Therefore, conclusions will be made through consideration of different viewpoints, both from the side of an autistic child and from the side of a non-autistic adult. This will highlight the main issues associated with self-esteem in general, and also highlight how autistic children can be more adversely affected by self-esteem issues. Overall, the study intends to provide a critical view by comparing and contrasting reported research and personal experience in order to answer the question of how important self-esteem is, and how much more important it becomes in the case of an autistic child.

Keywords*: Autism, Low self-esteem and Learning Journal*

1. Introduction

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to analyse the key issues associated with low self-esteem in autistic children. Childhood is a sensitive time in which self-esteem plays an important role. However, when the child is autistic, the situation is considerably more complicated because there are so many more issues to feel self-conscious about. By looking into the key causes and influences on low self-esteem in autistic children, this study aims to suggest the best ways for their self-esteem to be improved in the long-term. Furthermore, it aims to provide ideas as to how autistic children could be included and understood for who they are by peers, family and teachers. It supports the view that the extent to which an autistic child experiences their autism negatively may depend on how much support they are receiving (Olcott and Kluth 2009). Therefore, it will assert that support systems are crucial in determining whether an autistic child experiences low self-esteem.

1.2 Focus

The focus of this study will be the influence of parents and teachers on an autistic child's self-esteem. Because they are very influential figures in any child's life, it is justifiable to suggest that they play a major role in defining the self-esteem of autistic children. The main ways in which parents and teachers should ensure that the child's self-esteem stays high will be discussed in depth and the areas in which there are problems will be analysed.

2. Specific questions

1. What are the causes of low self-esteem in autistic children?

2. What are the effects of low self-esteem in autistic children?
3. What are possible strategies to improve self-esteem in autistic children?
4. How can autism-friendly schools be facilitated to support self-esteem in autistic children?

3. Low Self-esteem in Children with Autism
3.1 Causes of low self-esteem in children with autism

Although low self-esteem has not been labelled as a specific disorder, it is associated with various clinical problems (Reinecke, 2006). Although Plomin and Asbury (2005) have asserted that self-esteem can be something inherited genetically, it is important to consider the environmental factors because these are the areas that can be controlled and improved. This is an especially important point when it comes to children, because the formative nurturing in childhood will have major influences on their self-image, self-worth and self-esteem (Gibbs and Grey, 2006). However, autistic adults and children are constantly facing negative reactions to their difficulties in understanding social norms (Bullimer, 2008). For a child, such reactions could certainly have a strong influence on them in their formative years and make a long-term difference to their self-esteem. Because of the combination of being so young and easily-influenced, as well as autistic, it is fair to argue that the effects and consequences could be serious. Autistic children can be disapproved of and even rejected because of their autism and the problems they have with social encounters (Bullimer, 2008). For a child, such treatment could be very damaging to their self-esteem and especially their self-worth. For children with autism, the risks of low-self-esteem are higher because they have more difficulties with learning new skills, problem solving and effective social competence (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007).

Another key cause of low self-esteem in autistic children is that their difficulties are not always understood, which can exacerbate their problems (NAS, 1997). Attempts to understand why those with autism spectrum disorders have problems with social interaction began in the 1980's (Bowler 2007), however there are still frequent accounts of autistic people being misunderstood. Even when a child's autism is not viewed in a negative way, it is rarely viewed in a positive or even a neutral way, but as tragic (Olcott and Kluth, 2009). Even though this is not as bad as the rejection or disapproval discussed previously, it is certainly not encouraging if a child feels that others pity them for something that they cannot control. Again, this places them in the category of an 'outsider' or 'other'. If self-esteem is linked with feeling accepted (Bal, 2008), then this habit of viewing autistic children as 'tragic' could reduce their self-esteem as it reduces their sense of acceptance in society. Comparisons between autistic and non-autistic children can also be detrimental (Meek, 2006).

Furthermore, the people who are central in the child's life can also affect their self-esteem. Even teachers can often fail to understand their autistic students (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007). Therefore, another cause could be treatment from figures of authority, who are quite influential. If a child sees their teacher as someone to look up to, but the teacher is treating them in a way that suggests the child is 'deficient', then the child's self-esteem will be especially vulnerable. Furthermore, some autistic children suffer bullying from their teachers because the teachers misunderstand their behaviours as sneaky or disobedient (Bogdashina, 2006). Self-esteem is certainly linked with feeling accepted, and if teachers make their young students feel excluded or different, then there can be negative consequences. The strengths of an autistic child may be overlooked, which is well expressed by Magnusen: "Their autism is so striking that we may see their differences before we can appreciate their capabilities" (2005:14). This too could cause low self-esteem, because even their strengths, which can be numerous, can be overshadowed.

Similarly, the sense of low self-esteem can be worsened if parents cannot accept the child's autism and appear to be constantly trying to 'fix' it with changing therapies and programmes because this can also make the child feel deficient (Bal, 2008). This is a serious point, because self-esteem will not improve if children are made to feel that they are not good enough (Notbohm, 2005). Therefore, if as

figures of authority parents give the impression that the child is 'deficient', then their self-esteem could become low.

3.2 Effects of low self-esteem in children with autism

Because self-esteem is linked to many other factors, such as self-awareness and self-acceptance, low self-esteem can have an extended effect on these other factors. The causes for self-esteem discussed above all involve other people, whether teachers or parents. A lack of understanding of autism by teachers can result in autistic children having a poor self-concept and a damaged personal and social identity (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007). As previously discussed, teachers are figures of authority for children. If they don't offer support and understanding, the decrease in self-esteem can negatively affect many other issues. A reduction in self-esteem has been described as having risks, such as discrimination, problems adapting to new situations and communication (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007). Autistic children already have difficulty with communication and coping well in new situations, and they can be discriminated against. Therefore, it is possible that if an autistic child suffers from low self-esteem they may also face the risks associated with it. Because the risks are very similar to problems already faced by autistic children, it could result in their autism-associated difficulties becoming worse. For example, if an autistic child already has problems with communication, and then their self-esteem goes down, they may then see their communication problems worsen. The effects of autism and low self-esteem could possibly combine to make their symptoms more severe.

This can have further effects on their social life. In some cases, autistic children have, after being bullied, become bullies themselves in order to make up for their lack of self-esteem (Bogdashina, 2006). This can be serious because it makes the issue of social inclusion and acceptance even harder if the child becomes a bully. Therefore, this could cause a very negative cycle, where low self-esteem results in the child becoming a bully, and then being a bully greatly reduces the chance the child has of gaining the acceptance they need to improve their self-esteem. However, autism spectrum disorder theories suggest that this could be unlikely. The point that the autistic child would imitate or copy others goes against the theory that autistic are unable to perceive others in the same way that they see themselves (Bowler 2007).

Therefore such imitations, as well as such the ability to infer all of the social issues, are unlikely in an autistic child. However, it is an interesting point to keep in mind. While success in school can be a boost to self-esteem, difficulties in school can damage self-esteem and have further negative effects. Testing systems have been criticised for failing to give credit to the achievements of children with learning difficulties or disabilities (Meek 2006; Occult and Kluth, 2009). Autistic children often have difficulty with tests, which can greatly damage their self-concept as well as their motivation to succeed (Meek, 2006). It appears that, as their self-esteem is reduced when they feel they cannot complete certain tasks, other factors are also severely affected. Self-concept and self-esteem are very closely linked, but losing the motivation to succeed could be very damaging also. Because autistic children experience the world differently to other children (Occult and Kluth, 2009), they often have much more to deal with. Therefore, if the motivation to succeed is lost, it could affect their desire to try in an environment that is already more challenging than usual. Meek (2006) noted that children with disabilities often just gave up during exams which affected their spirit and attitude toward learning. Again, this effect of low self-esteem in learning can be very damaging because autistic children have additional lessons on social interaction, which comes very easily to non-autistic children, so motivation is necessary. If their motivation suffers because of low self-esteem, it could affect their future as a whole.

4. Implications for Educational Practice
4.1 Strategies to improve self-esteem in children with autism

Now that the causes and effects of low self-esteem have been discussed and understood, it is possible to assert how to tackle the issues. Children with autism become intensely interested in one specific

subject, which they tend to talk about quite a lot, which may be a way of boosting their self-esteem (Evans and Daniels, 2006). This could be used to improve their self-esteem because it could become a strength for them, which they could then receive praise for. Occult and Kluth (2009) discussed the case of Cole, who had a specific interest in a security and communications system. His teacher used this point to make him feel more comfortable in his inclusive classroom. This also shows how a familiar point, that the child is particularly interested in, can be used to strengthen both their self-esteem and their comfort in the class. Familiarity can also help autistic children to feel less distressed (Moor, 2008), therefore incorporating familiar things in new lessons and interactions, whether at home or at school, could be a useful strategy. This could increase the chance of success in learning both academically and socially, which could improve self-esteem.

The importance of self-esteem is clear, as treatments have been created that target self-esteem as an issue, and have had positive results with children (Reinecke et al., 2006). As discussed, self-esteem can be improved by celebrating successes, making expectations clear and providing support (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007). Therefore, it is vital that parents and teachers create an environment where they can do well so that they can succeed and receive praise for it. Furthermore, support is vital. As well as academically, it is important that parents support their children in social situations (Notbohm, 2005). Furthermore, Olcott and Kluth (2009), both teachers with experience of teaching autistic children in their classes, found that the best place to develop autistic pupils' academic skills, as well as their life skills, was in an inclusive classroom with their non-autistic peers.

Achievement and success are linked with self-esteem (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007), and by allowing autistic students to take part in inclusive classes they would be more likely to succeed academically (Olcott and Kluth, 2009). This would certainly be a major boost to their self-esteem. Therefore, the facilitation of autism-friendly schools is important as a strategy for improving self-esteem in autistic children. Furthermore, interaction in an environment that is very print- and language-rich has been found to help autistic children integrate written literacy with speech (Olcott and Kluth, 2009). It also gives the opportunity for autistic children to socialise, and for children in the class to find ways to communicate with them. In one case, children in a class which included an autistic child found ways to communicate with her and made the effort (Olcott and Kluth, 2009). The need for teachers to create an inclusive, comfortable environment is therefore further defended.

This returns back to the point of acceptance. Through children finding a way to communicate with her, it is more likely that she would feel accepted, which in turn should reduce the risk of developing low self-esteem. Social inclusion is central to self-esteem (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007), and this can only really be achieved if teachers create the appropriate environment. Meeting school standards could certainly increase the self-esteem of an autistic child, but school success depends on the support of parents and teachers (Meek, 2006). Importantly, this must include an appreciation that parents and teachers of autistic children should not put the same expectations on them as they do for other children (Rogers, 2007).

4.2 Facilitating autism-friendly schools to support self-esteem in autistic children

Autism-friendly schools would certainly increase the self-esteem of autistic children because, as discussed, a key point of self-esteem is feeling accepted. First it is important to consider practical issues when it comes to communication. Evans and Daniels cited a study by Biklen (1990) in which it was asserted that "90% of children with autism would be able to communicate using Facilitated Communication and that once they were able to communicate, they would display normal to high intelligence levels" (2006:25). The use of facilitated communication has also meant some autistic children could be returned to regular classrooms (Evans and Daniels, 2006). Being in a regular classroom is likely to boost self-esteem because high self-esteem depends on feeling included socially (Jones-Forrester and Broadhurst, 2007). In this way, children with problems communicating in class could contribute to their classes though facilitated communication. In their study of literacy classes

and the involvement of autistic children, Olcott and Kluth (2009) also highlighted the importance of alternative communication methods. Not only did they find many ways in which to facilitate autism-friendly classes, but they added that it could benefit both the students and teachers. Teachers found that they had to be more reflective in their teaching and more explicit with their instructions, which helped the autistic students and the class as a whole. Furthermore, it prompted the teachers and students to use multiple ways of participating in class because they were forced to consider alternative ways of communicating (Olcott and Kluth, 2009). Again, the successes are based on the right environment being created.

However, the success of inclusion also depends on autistic children being able to cope in social situations. If self-esteem is linked with feeling socially included, then it is therefore likely that learning to cope in social situations would certainly help a child's self-esteem. There are various ways to assist in this. It is too simplistic merely to explain how to handle different situations, and it is thought that actually teaching lessons about social interaction would be beneficial. It would offer more structure for the students, allow them to take pride in their achievements and use their newly learned skills in their inclusive classes.

Visual-based strategies could be very beneficial because all children tend to be more receptive to learning things visually. One method, called "social stories" (Reincke, 2006), co-ordinates text with pictures so that situations which autistic children find difficult become more predictable. By studying such pictures, the situations can be remembered and strategies applied in similar situations in future. Because the visual sense is the strongest sense in many autistic children (Notbohm, 2005), this strategy could be especially successful. This method uses the child's imagination, which is an extremely strong social tool because it allows them to imagine how others will be feeling when we take a certain action (Moor, 2008: 221). This could help with coping in social situations, because as well as having problems interacting verbally, they also struggle with non-verbal behaviours, such as gestures, body postures, facial expressions and direct eye-contact (Bowler 2007). The pictures could therefore be very useful as a marker for autistic children to assess the situation they are in.

Using the imagination also encourages children to imagine the consequences of certain actions (Moor, 2008). By combining the concept of "social stories" with the idea that imagination is a strong social tool, it becomes clear that these types of learning strategies can be very helpful for autistic children. Although certain social behaviours are not easy for them, they can be learned (Richman, 2006). Because autistic children sometimes have difficulty with using their imagination (Moor, 2008), this exercise is clearly even more beneficial because it would also encourage them to try. However, scenarios should be realistic, familiar and simple because these factors reduce the risk of the child feeling confusion and distress (Moor, 2008). The outcomes of such measures depend upon the skills and attitudes of the people working with autistic children. Autistic children's potential is often overlooked by teachers (Bodgashina, 2006). A key point of facilitating an autism-friendly school is promoting understanding. If autistic students receive support from their teachers at school, the learning experience could be improved. It would be ideal if teachers were well-informed about autism so they could better understand their students. Autistic students have many different types of learning styles, such as sequential learners, who benefit from clear instructions and like visual organisation, and gestalt learners, who break down information into manageable sections (Notbohm, 2005). These are just a few of the learning styles, but the point demonstrates that autistic children require more understanding if they are to succeed in education.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, in order for self-esteem to improve in autistic children, there must be strong support structures that encourage and facilitate learning. This depends on a strong understanding of autism by parents and teachers, to make sure that children are not bullied or made to feel deficient. Academic

success is a great way to increase self-esteem, and this would be a good route to begin with. Furthermore, the support could also help autistic children in social situations.

As discussed, Occult and Kluth (2009) found that there are various ways of including autistic children in classrooms. However, it is still important to concentrate on lessons that are specifically necessary for autistic children, such as social interaction awareness. With successes in inclusive classes, and improvements in social interaction, self-esteem should certainly improve. However, if academic achievements are to be successful, then autistic children should receive certain exemptions and understanding. This is especially important when it comes to testing, because it is much more difficult for an autistic child to perform under exam conditions. If these points are not given attention, then the child may lose motivation, which can be a severe problem in both their social and academic learning. Because home and school, parents and teachers, are all involved in the self-esteem of an autistic child, it is important that schools and parents work together to make sure that both home and school environments are supportive. This should also help reduce discrimination. Meek asserted: "They are equal, but they are not the same" (Meek, 2006:297). This is an important point, because differences do not always have to be interpreted as a negative, but can be appreciated. If autistic children are appreciated for who they are, instead of what they cannot do, their self-esteem, and their quality of life, could improve greatly. From experience, it is certainly true that higher self-esteem makes for a happier, more successful life.

Acknowledgements

References

1. Ball, J. (2008). Intervention and Autism: Real-Life Questions, Real-Life Answers. Place of publication: Future Horizons.
2. Bogdashina, O. (2006). Theory of mind and the triad of perspectives on autism and Asperger's syndrome: a view from the bridge. Place of publication: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
3. Bowler, D. M. 2007. Autism Spectrum Disorders: Psychological theory and research. Place of publication: John Wiley and Sons.
4. Bullimer, K. (2008). Quirky Citizens: Autism, Gender, and Reimagining Disability. Signs.
5. Chandler-Olcott, K. and Kluth, P. (2009). Why everyone benefits from including students with Autism in Literacy classrooms. The Reading Teacher.
6. Dörnyei, Z. (2005). The Psychology of the language learner: individual differences in second language acquisition. Place of publication: Routledge.
7. Evans, R. and Daniels, R. (2006). Essential Guide to Autism. SGC Health.
8. Forrester-Jones, R. V. E. and Broadhurst, S. (2007). Autism and Loss. Place of publication: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
9. Gibbs, E. A. and Grey, P. A. (2006). Five Foundations of Human Development. Place of publication: Author House.
10. Jafari, A. and Kaufman, C. (2006). Handbook of research on e Portfolios. Place of publication: Idea Group.
11. Liu, M. (2009). Reticence and anxiety in Oral English Lessons. Foreign language study.
12. Magnusen, C. (2005). Teaching children with autism and related spectrum disorders: an art and a science. Place of publication: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
13. McCauley, C. D. and Velsor, E. V. (2004). Handbook of Leadership Development.Place of publication: John Wiley and Sons.
14. Mecca, A. M., Smelser, N. J. and Vasconcellos, J. (1989). The social importance of self-esteem.Place of publication: University of California Press.

15. Meek, C.(2006). From the inside out: a look at teaching special education students. The Phi Delta Kappan.

16. Moon, J.A.(1999).Learning Journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development. Routledge.

17. Moor, J. (2008). Playing, Laughing and Learning with Children on the Autism Spectrum: a practical resource of play ideas for parents and carers. Place of publication: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

18. National Autistic Society. (1997). Inclusion and Autism, Is it Working? National Autistic Society.

19. Newman, B. M. and Newman, P. R. (2008). Development through life: a psychosocial approach. Place of publication: Cengage learning.

20. Notbohm, E.(2005). Ten things every child with Autism wishes you knew. Place of publication: Future Horizons.

21. Paton, A. and Wilkins, M. (2009). Teaching Adult ESOL. Place of publication: McGraw-Hill International.

22. Plomin, R. and Asbury, K. (2005). Nature and Nurture: Genetic and Environmental Influences on Behaviour. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 600, The Use and Usefulness of the Social Sciences: Achievements, Disappointments, and Promise.

23. Porter, J. R. and Washington, R. E. (1993). Minority Identity and Self-Esteem. Annual Review of Sociology.

24. Reinecke, M. A., Dattilio, F. M. and Freeman, A. (2006). Cognitive therapy with children and adolescents. Place of publication: Guildford press.

25. Richman, S. (2006). Encouraging appropriate behaviour for children on the autism spectrum. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

26. Rogers, C. (2007). Experiencing an 'Inclusive' Education: Parents and Their Children with 'Special Needs'. British Journal of Sociology and Education.

27. Simmermacher, D. G. (2005). Becoming the Me I want to Be. Place of publication: Health Press.

28. Spinner-Halev, J. and Theiss-Morse, E. (2003). National Identity and Self-Esteem. Perspectives on Politics

29. Stark, P. B. and Flaherty, J. (1999). The Competent leader: a powerful and practical tool kit for managers and supervisors. Human resource development

30. Stevens. D. D. and Cooper. J. E. (2009). Journal keeping: how to use reflective writing for effective learning, teaching, professional insight, and positive change. Place of publication: Stylus Publishing.