

## Yep, life'll burst that self-esteem bubble

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Andrea Sobel shudders at those oh-so-positive messages aimed at boosting kids' self-esteem.



No sense of entitlement: Andrea Sobel gives her twins chores to do around the house.

By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

She has heard her fill of "good job" or "great picture" or any of the highly exaggerated claims that parenting experts and educators spouted as the way to bring up well-adjusted children.

Sobel, the mother of 16-year-old twins in Sherman Oaks, Calif., says they could tell "what was real and what was fake," even when very young. "I was tired of going to the sports field and seeing moms say, 'Great job at going up to bat.' It hit me early on that kids could see through inane compliments."

Those often-empty phrases, however, raised a generation. Kids born in the '70s and '80s are now coming of age. The colorful ribbons and shiny trophies they earned just for participating made them feel special. But now, in college and the workplace, observers are watching them crumble a bit at the first blush of criticism.

"I often get students in graduate school doing doctorates who made straight A's all their lives, and the first time they get tough feedback, the kind you need to develop skills," says Deborah Stipek, dean of education at Stanford University. "I have a box of Kleenex in my office because they haven't dealt with it before."

To be clear, self-esteem is important to healthy development. Kids who hold themselves in poor stead are thought to be most vulnerable to trouble — from low academic achievement to drug abuse or crime. For those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the stakes may be higher and the needs even greater. But empty praise — the kind showered on many kids years ago in the name of self-esteem — did more harm than good.

"Instead of boosting self-esteem, it can lead you to question your competence," says developmental psychologist Sandra Graham of UCLA.

Self-esteem became a buzzword more than 20 years ago, fueled by parenting experts, psychologists and educators. Believers suggested that students who hold themselves in high regard are happier and will

succeed. That culture was so ingrained in parents that protecting their children from failure became a credo. This feel-good movement was most evident in California, which created a task force to increase self-esteem.

"At the time my children were raised, we were suffering from a misguided notion that healthy self-esteem results from something extrinsic that tells you you are a good person," says Betsy Brown Braun, a child development specialist in Pacific Palisades, Calif., and the mother of 26-year-old triplets.

It wasn't limited to the West Coast. Raising self-esteem became a national concern, and educators thought it could help raise academic achievement.

But schools got sidetracked into worrying more about feelings, says Charles Sykes in *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, or Add*. "Self-esteem has virtually become an official ideology," he writes.

A 1991 teacher training session in the Houston area taught the evils of red ink and told teachers to pick another color, says Pat Green, a teacher since 1982.

"They said it had a very negative impact, because red is so symbolic of wrong answers," she says.

Some also said grammar and spelling errors should be overlooked so students wouldn't be discouraged from writing, Green says. "It was so 'don't damage their self-esteem' to the point where you would praise things that weren't very good."

Cassie Bryant, 22, is a product of those times. "I kind of became an award junkie," she says.

She believes the awards motivated her and helped her get into a competitive college. But, she recalls her first semester at New York University as "brutal."

"I had always been in honors in high school, and the writing teacher said, 'I don't think that's a good place for you.' I started crying right there. I had never been told that before."

Now, the tides have turned. Schools teach the basics to improve performance on standardized tests, and self-esteem programs have evolved from phony praise to deserved recognition for a job well-done.

Girl Scouts of the USA promotes self-esteem by emphasizing strengths and skills while encouraging feelings of competence, says developmental psychologist Harriet Mosatche, senior director of research and program. "It used to be, 'Whatever you do is great.' That old-fashioned misuse of the notion of self-esteem is not positive. It's unrealistic, and not helpful," she says.

Well-meaning parents lap up that philosophy in the movie *Meet the Fockers*, with Bernie Focker proudly displaying his grown son's awards when he visits to introduce his in-laws-to-be. "I didn't know they made ninth-place ribbons," says the future father-in-law. "They have them up to 10th place," Focker replies. "There's a bunch on the 'A for Effort' shelf there." Roy Baumeister, a psychology professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee, says he had "high hopes" for the benefits of boosting self-esteem when he began studying it more than 30 years ago.

But his lengthy review of 18,000 articles, published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, ended with the realization that only two clear benefits emerge from high self-esteem: enhanced initiative, which boosts confidence, and increased happiness.

"There is not nearly as much benefit as we hoped," he says. "It's been one of the biggest disappointments of my career."

Overall, research shows that self-esteem scores have increased with the generations, says Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University who compared studies on self-esteem of 66,000 college kids across the USA from 1968 through 1994. Such studies are typically based on self-ratings.

She also has noticed that the undergraduates she teaches tend to have an inflated sense of self. "When you correct writing, they'll say, 'It's just your opinion,' which is infuriating. Bad grammar and spelling and sentences being wrong is not my opinion, it's just bad writing," she says.

So when the criticism flows, some college students are increasingly seeking counseling. Sam Goldstein, a neuropsychologist at the University of Utah, likened some students to bubbles — on the surface they seem secure and happy, yet with the least adversity they burst.

Neil Howe, co-author of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, urges colleges and employers to better understand this group, born in 1982 and later, who are in college or recently graduated.

Howe believes "millennials" are a very connected, team-oriented generation that could benefit society. "It's a positive for the workforce and possibly for politics and community life and citizenship," he says.

But employers such as Sobel, director of recruitment for an entertainment firm, aren't so sure. "One of the things the managers talked about is an incredible sense of entitlement for people who don't deserve it," she says. "They'll come in right out of college and don't understand why they're not getting promoted in three months."

Howe blames the attitude on society's high expectations. "We've become a much more child-oriented society around millennials," he says. "Self-esteem for them meant you're the focus of society's attention."