

Tough Love

In the long run, students will have higher self-esteem if they receive honest feedback.

By Sharon Begley

At the annual meeting of psychology researchers in Boston three years ago, two scientists weighed in on a question that seemed to be as much in need of investigation as whether the sun rises in the east.

The pair had asked a professor to send weekly e-mail messages to students of his who had done poorly on their first exam for the class. Each message included a review question.

In addition, one-third of the students, chosen at random, also received a message—advice to study, for example—suggesting that how well they did in the course was under their own control.

The other third received the review question plus a “You’re too smart to get a D!” pep talk aimed at raising their self-esteem, which everyone knows boosts academic performance. Oops.

Compared with the other e-mail recipients, the D and F students who got the self-esteem injection performed notably worse on later tests.

It has been 20 years since self-esteem became a household word and an educational mantra. The watershed moment came in 1986, when California funded a task force to increase the self-esteem of state residents, based on arguments that the \$245,000 annual cost would more than pay for itself in reduced welfare dependency, un-

wanted pregnancy, school failure, crime, and drug addiction.

With that, the self-esteem movement was off and running, preaching that one’s beliefs about oneself have important consequences no matter what the underlying reality. Healthy self-esteem was to be the wellspring from which wonderful outcomes flowed.

Now, the most exhaustive study ever finds that programs to raise self-esteem fall woefully, even comically, short. In the case of the struggling students, the likely reason the self-esteem intervention backfired speaks volumes. Students work hard partly because it helps them do better academically; 95’s feel better than 65’s.

But “an intervention that encourages them to feel good about themselves regardless of work may remove the reason to work hard—resulting in poorer performance,” suggest psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues in a monograph in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. If you get to feel good without learning Maxwell’s equations or the causes of the Korean War, why bother?

It isn’t just school performance. From the 200-plus studies they analyzed, Baumeister et al found no evidence that boosting self-esteem — by therapeutic interventions or school

programs) results in better job performance, lowered aggression or reduced delinquency. And “high self-esteem does not prevent children from smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in early sex.”

Of course, self-esteem and school or job performance are correlated. But long-overdue scientific scrutiny points out the foolishness of supposing that people’s opinion of themselves can be the cause of achievement. Rather, high-esteem is the result of good performance.

Boosting self-esteem without helping people learn more or perform better does not bring higher achievement at school or work (and can backfire, as our D and F students show). And, speaking of backfiring, high self-esteem fosters experimentation, which may increase teenage indulgence in sex, alcohol or drugs.

As we persist in praising children even for mediocre work and trivial accomplishments, I can’t resist ending with the following plea from Dr. Baumeister.

“Psychologists should reduce their own self-esteem a bit and humbly resolve that next time they will wait for a more thorough and solid empirical basis before making policy recommendations to the public.”

(Adapted with permission from The Wall Street Journal, April 18, 2003)