

Doorway to Success

by Lisa M. Jacobsen

Many educators struggle with the question: "How can one build a young person's self-esteem?" The process is quite simple, but implementation can be difficult. Self-esteem is built upon experiencing success. One might view it as a circular process. When children experience success their self-confidence is boosted. As students' self-confidence grows, they feel empowered to face new challenges. As youngsters succeed in confronting challenges, they develop the capacity to cope with whatever life throws their way. That feeling subsequently leads to further growth of self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-esteem.

Doorway to Success is a program I developed in my third-grade classroom. It benefits everyone involved. The goal of the program is to raise student self-esteem. In so doing it has increased student risk-taking and willingness to take on new challenges. Doorway to Success is a year-long program that gets parents actively involved in their children's academic and emotional growth. In addition, it helps to create a healthful learning environment in which each child's strengths are highlighted.

Research has also indicated the importance of parental participation in children's school experiences. Parents are their children's first teachers. Their involvement allows them to understand curriculum and teacher expectations. Parents can reinforce teachers' expectations at home, therefore increasing children's ability to become successful.

Parental involvement also increases children's feelings of worth. When parents are interested and involved in children's lives, the children feel important and loved. In our busy world, where in many cases both parents are working or a single parent is working, every shared experience between parent and child, no matter how small, is an important one.

Furthermore, children's education is perhaps the most important experience parents can be involved in. Children spend on average six hours

a day for 180 days in school every year. That's 1,080 hours for each child. Parents who spend even an hour in school a year with their children create everlasting memories.

Last, parental involvement in school is important in building relationships with the next most important people in children's lives: their teachers. Close, working relationships between teachers and parents create positive environments in which success is inevitable.

Thus, the more successes and positive parent-child relationships we educators can build into students' learning experiences and students' capacities to feel self-sufficient, the more opportunities we will have to increase their self-esteem. The Doorway to Success program was designed to assist with this undertaking.

To begin I will explain why I felt Doorway to Success was especially appropriate for third graders in Glen Ridge. (This program may certainly be appropriate for nearly any grade level, depending on a district's layout and curriculum.) The town has two primary schools, grades pre-K through 2, and one upper-elementary school, grades 3-6. The transition between second and third grade is more than a mere curriculum change; it's a school change. The children leave their neighborhood schools, where there are three second-grade classes totaling approximately sixty-six students, to attend a larger school in the center of town. There are six third-grade classes totaling more than 130 students.

Both parents and students feel some apprehension about the transition. This is one more reason the Doorway to Success program was developed. Doorway to Success is a collaborative project run by the classroom teacher. The program has three components. The first is a special bulletin board on the classroom door. I create deco-

Lisa M. Jacobsen is a teacher at Ridgewood Avenue Upper Elementary School in Glen Ridge, New Jersey.

rative stationery on my computer with different sentence starters for each month. Then I send the stationery home to parents for them to complete and send back to school. Examples of some sentence starters include: "My child is a superstar because . . ."; "I'm thankful to have my child because . . ."; and "My child makes my heart smile. . ."

Each theme is related to the time of year it is completed. The April stationery—"On rainy days I enjoy spending time with _____ because . . ."—has been designed so a sibling can fill it out. The responses by the parents are heartwarming. Parents have included chronicles of their children's kindest gestures, such as donating time to work in soup kitchens, giving their toys to people who are less fortunate than they, and giving up pets for adoption. Other parents simply state the little things they love about their children: how they take care of younger siblings or pets, wake their parents every morning by singing, always include everyone so that no child is left out, or help the family when a parent is ill.

These loving, uplifting messages are displayed on the door to the classroom. As the children enter the room they stop to read the messages written about themselves and others. When visitors enter the room or walk down the hallway, they too are captivated by the messages. The positive tone set by the parents' physical presence in the classroom is created and fostered by their participation in the Doorway to Success program.

The second aspect of the program is parental involvement as guest readers. Every week a different parent is a guest reader in the class. The parent and child sit together and tell the class why a favorite book is special to them. As the parent shares the book with the class, the child takes part in the reading.

Some parents have taken this project a step further by teaching the class a lesson. For example, one parent who is a chemist made homemade slime with the class, while another taught the class some basic sign language. Parents who are journalists, lawyers, amateur landscapers, and seamstresses have also taken the lead in various lessons throughout the school year.

The memories of the special days are captured with photographs and displayed in the room. Some parents have used the read-alouds to take part in their children's birthday celebrations; other parents have shared art activities or treats they prepared with their children. There are many other opportunities for parents to share in

classroom activities, but read-aloud presentations are by far the most rewarding for the children.

The third component of the program is a "Let's Celebrate Success" breakfast for students and parents. In preparation for this special day, held in June, the Doorway to Success stationery from the year and the photos taken of the children and their parents are made into books to give to the children at the parent-child breakfast. The children prepare for the breakfast by composing heartfelt messages about why they love their parents. Their paragraphs are written on certificates that include the students' digital pictures. At the breakfast the children present the messages to their parents from the podium. This culminating celebration sends the children to fourth grade feeling proud of their accomplishments, and the parents proud of their children.

After the breakfast parents were asked to comment in writing about the program. The positive responses were overwhelming. One parent wrote, "What we [the mom and dad] loved about this project is that it was a positive experience for all of us." Many parents included comments like: "Excellent idea—a great confidence booster for kids and a reminder of the truly wonderful things our kids do and are." All parents who commented agreed that the Doorway to Success program was a wonderful opportunity to share actively in their children's education, increase their children's self-esteem, and stop to think about how special their children are. Perhaps one parent's comment sums up the Doorway to Success experience best. She wrote, "It's amazing how one's children can discount or forget praise that's doled out on a day-to-day basis, but when it's written for all to see they really hear it."

The Doorway to Success program has given the children a positive self-concept and a feeling of worth. During my first year of implementing the Doorway to Success I observed less frustration among students. Children were willing to try challenging activities and push themselves to the next level. The words "I can't" or "This is too hard" are not heard in my classroom. Student test scores have risen considerably since September as well.

All in all, the Doorway to Success program has positively affected my students' emotional, social, and academic progress. I would highly recommend Doorway to Success to elementary teachers who would like to foster a positive environment in their classroom.