SOCIAL SCIENCE

Born in the 1980s and 1990s, Millennials are reshaping schools, colleges, and businesses all over the country. They are tolerant, confident, open-minded, and ambitious, but also disengaged, narcissistic, distrustful, and anxious. And these children of Baby Boomers are now feeling the effects of the changing job market—even as they effect change the world over.

When this "fascinating" (*Publishers Weekly*) book was first published in 2006, psychologist Dr. Jean Twenge made headlines with her findings from the largest intergenerational study ever conducted—with data spanning six decades—about the lives of the generation now in their 20s and 30s. In this newly revised and updated edition of *Generation Me*, Dr. Twenge uses data from 11 million respondents to show how profoundly different today's young adults are from those of the past and how "GenMe'ers" have fundamentally changed the American character. With irony, humor, and sympathy, Dr. Twenge shows that American culture raised the aspirations of today's young people just as the world became more competitive, creating an enormous clash between expectations and reality.

Dr. Twenge makes controversial predictions about what the future holds for GenMe and society as a whole. She also uncovers shocking truths about this generation, including dramatic differences in sexual behavior and religious practice. Engaging, controversial, prescriptive, and funny, *Generation Me* gives Boomers and GenX'ers new and fascinating insights into their offspring and helps Millennials find their road to happiness.


AUTHOR PHOTO BY PAM DAVIS

JEAN M. TWENGE, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, is the author of more than one hundred scientific publications and two books based on her research, *Generation Me* and *The Narcissism Epidemic* (with W. Keith Campbell), as well as *The Impatient Woman's Guide to Getting Pregnant*. She lives in San Diego with her husband and daughters.

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GENERATION ME

Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before

REVISED AND UPDATED

Jean M. Twenge, PhD

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New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

grader scored at the 24th percentile, or lower than 76% of kid in the 1960s. This is an even larger change than for the colleg students—you would be pretty upset if your child came hom with a standardized-test score in the 24th percentile. These result suggested that the decline in social approval was pervasive: even children as young as nine showed the generational trend, with kids from GenMe scoring lower than kids from earlier generations

The Baby Boomers began this trend. The data show that the need for social approval reached an all-time low in the late 1970 to the early 1980s. This is not that surprising—the Boomer practically invented youth rebellion in the 1960s. By the 1970s the rebellion was mainstream, and the defiance of authority a accepted social value. Take the line yippie radical Jerry Rubin used in the late 1970s—if someone called him on the phone when he was, umm, otherwise occupied, he would say honestly, "Can't talk to you now—I'm masturbating."

The 1980s returned society to a somewhat more conventional existence. Slowly, men cut their hair (except for Ponch and Jon on *CHiPs*), pant legs went from flagrantly bell-bottom to normal (at least until bell-bottoms' resurgence around 1996), and pot smoking declined. It was not quite as necessary to rebel to fit in—which was always a rather ironic notion. GenMe turned this trend around to an extent, no longer thinking of social approval as something to be completely disdained. But the need for social approval did not even come close to the levels of the 1950s and 1960s—those days were gone forever.

A new movement dawned during the 1980s, however, a trend that GenMe would take to new heights, leaving Boomers in the dust. Generation Me believes, with a conviction that approaches boredom because it is so undisputed, that the individual comes first. It's the trend that gives the generation its name, and I explore it in the next two chapters.

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An Army of One: *Me*

One day when my mother was driving me to school in 1986, Whitney Houston's hit song "Greatest Love of All" was warbling out of the weak speakers of our Buick station wagon with wood trim. I asked my mother what she thought the song was about. "The greatest love of all—it has to be about children," she said.

My mother was sweet, but wrong. The song does say that children are the future (always good to begin with a strikingly original thought) and that we should teach them well. About world peace, maybe? Or great literature? Nope. Children should be educated about the beauty "inside," the song declares. We all need heroes, Whitney sings, but she never found "anyone who fulfilled my needs," so she learned to depend on (wait for it) "me." The chorus then declares, "learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all."

This is a stunning reversal in attitude from previous generations. Back then, respect for others was more important than respect for yourself. The term *self-esteem* wasn't widely used until the late 1960s and didn't become talk-show and dinner-table conversation until the 1980s. By the 1990s, it was everywhere.

Take, for example, the band Offspring's rockingly irreverent 1994 riff "Self-Esteem." The song describes a guy whose girlfriend "says she wants only me . . . Then I wonder why she sleeps with

tion Me? It's about what you explore as a young adult versus what you're born to and take for granted.

For the Boomers, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, self-focus was a new concept, individualism an uncharted territory. In his 1981 book *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, Daniel Yankelovich describes young Boomers struggling with new questions: How do you make decisions in a marriage with two equal partners? How do you focus on yourself when your parents don't even know what that means? The Boomers in the book sound like people driving around in circles in the dark, desperately searching for something. The world was so new that no road signs and no maps pointed the way to this new fulfillment and individuality.

That's probably why many Boomers talk about the self using abstract language full of introspection and "growth." New things call for this kind of meticulous thought and require time to process. Thus Boomers talk about "my journey," "my need to keep growing," or "my unfulfilled potentials." Sixties activist Todd Gitlin called the Boomer quest the "voyage to the interior." Icky as they are to today's young people, these phrases thrum with motion and time, portraying self-focus as a continuous project that keeps evolving as Boomers look around for true meaning. As P. J. O'Rourke puts it in *The Baby Boom*, "We're the generation that created the self, made the firmament of the self, divided the light of the self from the darkness of the self, and said let there be self. . . . Before us, self was without form and void, like our parents in their dumpy clothes and vague ideas." In a 1976 *New York* magazine article, Tom Wolfe described the "new dream" as "remaking, remodeling, elevating and polishing one's very self . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it." Sixties radical Jerry Rubin wrote that he tried just about every fad of the 1970s (Rolfing, est, yoga, sex therapy, finding his inner child); one of the chapters in his book *Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven* is called "Searching for Myself."

Such introspection primarily surfaces today in the speech of New Agers, Rogerian therapists, and over-55 Boomers. When

asked what's next in her life, Kim Basinger (born in 1953) replies, "Watching what the rest of my journey is going to be about." In answer to the same question, Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York (born in 1959), says, "My coming to stay in America for a few months is like my blossoming into my true Sarah, into my true self. And I'm just coming to learn about her myself." Not all Boomers talk this way, but enough do that it's an immediately recognizable generational tic. It's also a guaranteed way to get a young person to roll her eyes.

In *Boomer Nation*, Steve Gillon argues that abstraction and spirituality are the primary hallmarks of the Boomer generation. Gillon describes Boomers as having a "moralistic style" and devotes a chapter to Boomers' "new fundamentalism." Whether joining traditional churches or exploring meditation or yoga, Boomers have been fascinated with the spiritual for four decades.

Even Boomers who don't adopt New Age language seek higher meaning in the new religion of consumer products—thus the yuppie revolution. In *Bobos in Paradise*, David Brooks demonstrates that upper-class Boomers have poured their wealth into such things as cooking equipment, which somehow feels more moral and meaningful than previous money sinks such as jewelry or furs. Even food becomes "a barometer of virtue," Brooks says, as 1960s values are "selectively updated . . . Gone are the sixties-era things that were fun and of interest to teenagers, like Free Love, and retained are all the things that might be of interest to middle-aged hypochondriacs, like whole grains."

The Boomers' interest in the abstract shows up in the American Freshman nationally representative survey of 9 million entering college students. In 1967, a whopping 86% of incoming college students said that "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was an essential life goal. Only 46% of GenMe freshmen in 2012 agreed, cutting the Boomer number nearly in half. GenX started this move away from the abstract, and I'm definitely a member of my generation in this way. Despite being an academic,

I'm not sure I know what a "meaningful philosophy of life" even is. Jerry Rubin does—if you can understand him. "Instead of seeking with the expectation of finding, I experience my seeking as an end in itself," he writes. "I become one with my seeking, and merge with the moment." Okay, Jerry. Let us know when you've reentered the earth's atmosphere.

While up there, maybe Jerry met Aleta St. James, a 57-year-old woman who gave birth to twins in 2004. She explained her unusual actions by saying, "My whole world is about manifesting, so I decided to manifest children." It's not surprising that an enterprising GenMe'er put together a list of books on amazon.com titled "Tired of Baby Boomer Self-Righteousness?"

Boomers display another unique and somewhat ironic trait: a strong emphasis on group meetings. Boomers followed in the footsteps of their community-minded elders—they just joined the Weathermen instead of the Elks Lodge. This is one of the many reasons why Boomers are not the true Generation Me—almost everything they did happened in groups: Vietnam protests, marches for feminism, consciousness raising, assertiveness training, discos, and even seminars such as est. Maybe it felt safer to explore the self within a group—perhaps it felt less radical. No one seemed to catch the irony that it might be difficult to find your unique direction in a group of other people. Even Boomers' trends and sayings belied their reliance on groups: "Don't trust anyone over 30" groups people by age, as did the long hair many Boomer men adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s to distinguish themselves from older folks. In a 1970 song, David Crosby says he decided not to cut his hair so he could "let my freak flag fly." If you've got a flag, you're probably a group. Boomers may believe they invented individualism, but like any inventor, they were followed by those who perfected the invention.

Boomers took only the first tentative steps in the direction of self-focus, rather than swallowing it whole at birth. Most Boomers never absorbed it at all and settled down early to marry and raise

families. Those who adopted the ways of the self as young adults speak the language with an accent: the accent of abstraction and "journeys." They had to reinvent their way of thinking when already grown and thus see self-focus as a "process." In his book, Rubin quotes a friend who says, "We are the first generation to reincarnate ourselves in our own lifetime."

THE MATTER-OF-FACT SELF-FOCUS OF GENERATION ME

Generation Me had no need to reincarnate themselves; they were born into a world that already celebrated the individual. The self-focus that blossomed in the 1970s became mundane and commonplace over the next two decades, and GenMe accepts it like a fish accepts water. If Boomers were making their way in the uncharted world of the self, GenMe has its own GPS device—and most of the time they don't even need it, since the culture of the self is their hometown. They don't have to join groups or talk of journeys because they're already there. They don't need to "polish" the self, as Wolfe said, because they take for granted that it's already shiny. They don't need to look inward; they already know what they will find. Since they were small children, GenMe'ers were taught to put themselves first. That's just the way the world works—why dwell on it? Let's go to the mall.

GenMe's focus on the needs of the individual is not necessarily self-absorbed or isolationist; instead, it's a way of moving through the world beholden to few social rules and with the unshakable belief that you're important. It's also not the same as being spoiled, which implies that GenMe'ers always get what they want; though this does probably describe some kids, it's not the essence of the trend. (As I argue in chapter 4, GenMe's expectations are so great and reality so challenging that they will probably get less of what they want than any previous generation.) GenMe simply takes it for granted that we should all feel good about ourselves, we

are all special, and we all deserve to follow our dreams. GenMe straightforward and unapologetic about their self-focus. In *Conquering Your Quarterlife Crisis*, Jason, 25, relates how he went through some tough times and decided he needed to change things in his life. His new motto was "Do what's best for Jason. I had to make me happy; I had to do what was best for myself in every situation."

The matter-of-fact attitude of GenMe'ers appears in everyday language as well—a language that still includes the abstract concept of self, but uses it in a simple way, perhaps because they learned the language as children. They speak the language of the self as their native tongue. So much of the "commonsense" advice that's given these days includes some variation on "self":

- Worried about how to act in a social situation? "Just be yourself."
- What's the good thing about your alcoholism/drug addiction/murder conviction? "I learned a lot about myself."
- Concerned about your performance? "Believe in yourself." (Often followed by "and anything is possible.")
- Should you buy the new pair of shoes or get the nose ring? "Yes, express yourself."
- Why should you leave the unfulfilling relationship/quit the boring job/tell off your mother-in-law? "You have to respect yourself."
- Trying to get rid of a bad habit? "Be honest with yourself."
- Confused about the best time to date or get married? "You have to love yourself first before you can love someone else."
- Should you express your opinion? "Yes, stand up for yourself."

Or, as Lena Dunham's character on *Girls* puts it, managing to focus on herself without using the word *self*, "And then I am busy trying to become who I am."

Even a brief frolic through the Google Books database shows

the incredible growth in such phrases. In American books between 1960 and 2008, *just be yourself* became 8 times more frequent, *learned about myself* 4.6 times, *believe in yourself* 6.5 times, *express yourself* 2 times, *respect yourself* 2.7 times, *be honest with yourself* 3 times, *love yourself* 5.7 times, *I love me* 6.7 times, and *stand up for yourself* 6 times. A recent study found that presidential State of the Union addresses have become more individualistic over time, with more mentions of the self (such as *I* and *me*) and fewer mentions of others and friends.

As you'll see later in chapter 7 on equality, individualism is a cultural system with many advantages. Yet recent culture seems to have crossed the line from individualism to hyperindividualism. For example, the self-focused phrases are not just individualistic—they're also, well, wrong. "Just be yourself" sounds like good advice at first, but what if you're a jerk? What if you're a serial killer? Maybe you should be someone else. "Believe in yourself" is fine, but "anything is possible"? No, it's not. Expressing yourself, respecting yourself, and being honest with yourself are somewhat tautological but not usually directly harmful. But "you have to love yourself first" has a crucial flaw: people who *really* love themselves are called narcissists, and they make horrible relationship partners.

Americans use these phrases so often that we don't even notice them anymore. Dr. Phil, the ultimate in plainspoken, no-nonsense advice, uttered both "respect yourself" and "stop lying to yourself" within seconds of each other on a *Today* show segment on New Year's resolutions. One of his bestselling books is entitled *Self Matters*. GenMe takes these phrases and ideas so much for granted that it's as if they learned them in their sleep as children, like the perfectly conditioned citizens in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

These aphorisms don't seem absurd even when, sometimes, they are. We talk about self-improvement as if the self could be given better drywall or a new coat of paint. We read self-help

THE SELF ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Baby Boomers	Generation Me
Self-fulfillment	Fun
Journey, potentials, searching	Already there
Change the world	Follow your dreams
Protests and group sessions	Watching TV, surfing the Web, and texting
Interest in government	Interest in yourself and your friends
Spirituality	Things
Philosophy of life	Feeling good about yourself

books as if the self could receive tax-deductible donations. The *Self* even has its own magazine. Psychologist Martin Seligman says that the traditional self—responsible, hardworking, stern—has been replaced with the "California self," "a self that chooses, feels pleasure and pain, dictates action and even has things like esteem, efficacy, and confidence." Media outlets promote the self relentlessly; I was amazed at how often I heard the word *self* used in the popular media once I started looking for it.

Young people have learned these self-lessons well. Twenty-year-old Maria says her mother often reminds her to consider what other people will think. "It doesn't matter what other people think," Maria insists. "What really matters is how I perceive myself. The real person I need to please is myself."

Smart marketers have figured this out too. Ford tells us "Everything We Do Is Driven by You." Honda touts "The Power of Dreams." The Toyota Scion, marketed to young drivers, says it's "United by Individuality," promising it will help you "create a following by never following. Stand with us by standing out. Be the original, not the copy." The US Army, perhaps the last organization one might expect to focus on the individual instead of the group, followed suit. From 2001 to 2006, its standard recruiting slogan was "An Army of One."

In 2013, the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s word of the year was *selfie*, coined to describe the now-common practice of taking a picture of yourself and sharing it online with the world. By January 2014, people were competing to take the best picture of themselves in the Selfie Olympics.

Even the pronouns we use have changed: Between 1960 and 2008, American books used first-person singular pronouns (*I, me, mine, my, myself*) 42% more often, and first-person plural pronouns (we, us, our, ours, ourselves) 10% less often. The biggest change: the use of second person (you, your, yours, yourself, yourselves) quadrupled—most likely due to two interlocking, individualistic trends: authors speaking directly to readers (so you experience the book in a personal way) and the self-help genre emphasizing "*your* best life," "what *you* can do," and so on. This shows how the cultural change reaches beyond just one generation: even the language in the books we read has fundamentally changed.

CHANGES IN SELF-ESTEEM: WHAT THE DATA SAY

The data on changes in positive self-views over time mirror the social trends almost exactly. In an initial study, W. Keith Campbell and I examined the responses of 65,965 college students to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), the most popular measure of general self-esteem. I held my breath when I analyzed these data for the first time, but I needn't have worried: the change was enormous. By the mid-1990s, the average college man had higher self-esteem than 86% of college men in 1968. The average mid-1990s college woman had higher self-esteem than 71% of Boomer college women. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, college students were increasingly likely to agree that "I take a positive attitude toward myself" and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." That's especially interesting as GenX got a reputation for being depressed cynics;

however, they weren't depressed or cynical about their own self-confidence.

So what happened to self-esteem in the transition to GenMe in the 2000s? For her master's thesis with me, Brittany Gentile decided to find out. Among 28,918 college students, the average GenMe college student in 2008 had higher self-esteem than 63% of GenX students in 1988—and that's after the already large increase between the 1960s and the 1980s. By 2008, the most frequent self-esteem score for college students was 40—the highest possible score and thus "perfect" self-esteem.

We then turned to other data sources. The nationally representative high school survey doesn't show any change in the RSE items, probably because it mixed the self-esteem items together with those measuring hopelessness and risk-taking and changed the order of the questions several times over the years. However, it shows lots of other evidence of rising self-views. GenMe high school students anticipate being awesome employees in the future: 68% of high school students in 2012 said they would be "very good" as a worker (the highest rating), compared to only 57% of Boomer high school students in 1976. Fifty-eight percent of 2012 students believe they will be a "very good" spouse, up from 41% in 1976. Fifty-nine percent are sure they will be a "very good" parent, compared to only 38% who were that certain in 1976. And twice as many high school students in 2012 versus those in 1976 said they were "completely" satisfied with themselves (the highest possible response).

Both high school and college students are also more likely to believe they're superior to their peers. When asked to compare themselves to others their age, 61% of 2012 GenMe college students said they were above average in their leadership ability, compared to 41% of Boomer college students in 1966. Seventy-six percent thought they were superior in their drive to achieve, versus 60% in 1966. Fifty-eight percent thought they were above average in intellectual self-confidence, compared to

only 39% in 1966—even though students in the 1960s earned higher SAT scores. The change wasn't due to college selectivity, either—more high school students enroll in college in the 2010s than in 1966, so the average GenMe college student is, objectively, less likely to be above average compared to others their age. GenMe high school students were also more likely to see themselves as above average: 65% of 2012 students believed they were above average in intelligence, compared to 57% in 1976. The number who described themselves as "far above average" in intelligence nearly doubled. Sixty-one percent believed they were above average in school ability, up from 56% in 1976. Yet on objective tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 12th-graders scored about the same in the 1970s and 2000s.

Children's self-esteem scores tell a different but even more intriguing story. We examined the responses of 39,353 children, most ages 9 to 13, on the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, a scale written specifically for children. During the 1970s—when the nation's children shifted from the late Baby Boom to the early years of GenX—kids' self-esteem declined, probably because of societal instability. Rampant divorce, a wobbly economy, soaring crime rates, and swinging-singles culture made the 1970s a difficult time to be a kid. The average child in 1979 scored lower than 81% of kids in the mid-1960s. Over this time, children were less likely to agree with statements like "I'm pretty sure of myself" and "I'm pretty happy" and more likely to agree that "things are all mixed up in my life." The individualism that was so enthralling for teenagers and adults in the 1970s didn't help kids—and, if their parents suddenly discovered self-fulfillment, it might even have hurt them.

But after 1980, with the later wave of GenX'ers, children's self-esteem took a sharp turn upward. More and more during the 1980s and 1990s, children were saying that they were happy with themselves. They agreed that "I'm easy to like" and "I always do

the right thing." By the mid-1990s, children's self-esteem scores equaled, and often exceeded, children's scores in the markedly more stable Boomer years before 1970. The average kid in the mid-1990s—the first wave of GenMe—had higher self-esteem than 73% of kids in 1979. The rise in self-esteem only continued from there. In a later analysis of the self-esteem scores of 10,119 middle school students, 80% of GenMe in 2007 scored higher in self-esteem than their GenX counterparts in 1988.

This is a bit of a mystery, however. The United States of the 1980s to 2000s never approached the kid-friendly stability of the 1950s and early 1960s: violent crime rose, divorce was still at epidemic levels, and the economy went through several recessions. Such societal upheavals usually have a negative effect on self-esteem. So without the calm and prosperity of earlier decades, why did children's self-esteem increase so dramatically during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s?

THE SELF-ESTEEM CURRICULUM

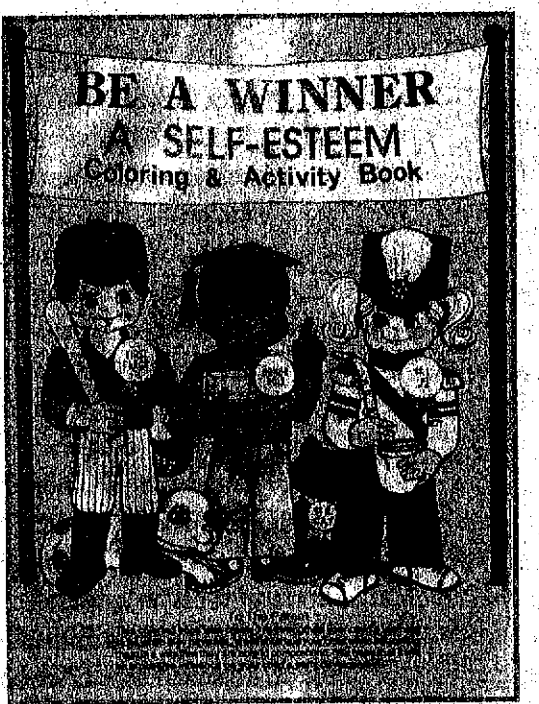
The short answer is that they were taught it. The years after 1980 saw a pervasive, societywide effort to increase children's self-esteem.

The Boomers who now filled the ranks of parents apparently decided that children should always feel good about themselves, and GenX'er parents continued that trend. Research on programs to boost self-esteem first blossomed in the 1980s, and the number of psychology and education journal articles devoted to self-esteem doubled between the 1970s and the 1980s. Journal articles on self-esteem increased another 52% during the 1990s, and the number of books on self-esteem doubled over the same time. Generation Me is the first generation raised to believe that everyone should have high self-esteem.

Magazines, television talk shows, and books all emphasize the importance of high self-esteem for children, usually promoting

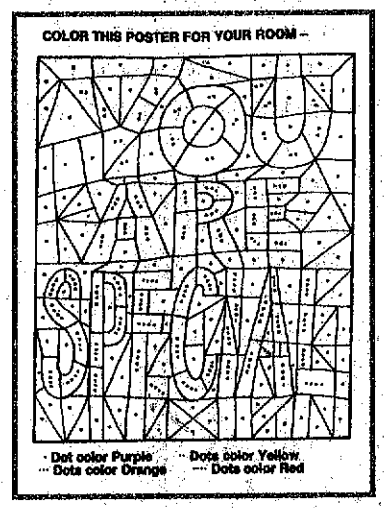
feelings that are a lot closer to narcissism (a more negative trait usually defined as an inflated sense of self). One children's book, first published in 1991, is called *The Lovables in the Kingdom of Self-Esteem*. "I AM LOVABLE. Hi, lovable friend! My name is Mona Monkey. I live in the Kingdom of Self-Esteem along with my friends the Lovable Team," the book begins. On the next page, children learn that the gates of the kingdom will swing open if you "say these words three times with pride: I'm lovable! I'm lovable! I'm lovable!"

Another example is the *BE A WINNER Self-Esteem Coloring and Activity Book* pictured in this chapter. Inside, children find ac-



Parents are encouraged to raise their children's self-esteem even when kids are simply coloring. Even the cat has high self-esteem on this coloring book cover. However, the dog lacks a self-esteem-boosting ribbon. He probably has low self-esteem—after all, he drinks out of the toilet.

tivities and pictures designed to boost their self-esteem, including coloring a "poster for your room" that reads YOU ARE SPECIAL in yellow, orange, and red letters against a purple background. Another page asks kids to fill in the blanks: "Accept y_ur_e_f. You're a special person. Use p_si_iv_ thinking." A similar coloring book is called *We Are All Special* (though this title seems to suggest that being special isn't so special).



Remember, everyone is special. Maybe if you color the whole poster you can catch the irony.

Many school districts across the country have specific programs designed to increase children's self-esteem, most of which seem to promote self-importance and narcissism. One program is called "Self-Science: The Subject Is Me." (Why bother with biology? I'm so much more interesting!) Another program, called "Pumsy in Pursuit of Excellence," uses a dragon character to encourage children to escape the Mud Mind they experience when feeling bad about themselves. Instead, they should strive to be in the Sparkle Mind and feel good about themselves. The Magic Circle exercise designates one child a day to receive a badge saying I'M GREAT. The other children then say good things about the chosen child, who later receives a written list of all of the praise. At the end of the exercise, the child must then say something good about him- or herself. Boomer children in the 1950s and 1960s gained self-esteem naturally from a stable, child-friendly society; GenMe's self-esteem has been actively cultivated for its own sake.

One Austin, Texas, father was startled to see his 5-year-old daughter wearing a shirt that announced I'M LOVABLE AND CAPABLE. All of the kindergarteners, he learned, recited this phrase before class, and they all wore the shirt to school on Fridays. It seems the school started a bit too young, however, because the child then asked, "Daddy, all the kids are wondering, what does *capable* mean?"

After school, when kids play sports, the self-esteem emphasis continues. In most leagues, everyone gets a trophy just for playing—you sit on the bench, you get the trophy; you don't try, you get the trophy; you suck, you still get a trophy. My nephew has a large trophy engraved with EXCELLENCE IN PARTICIPATION. What does that mean—I'm good at showing up? In other leagues, everyone gets the same-size trophy no matter who wins or loses. In a widely read op-ed in the *New York Times*, Ashley Merryman reported that trophy and award sales are a $3-billion-a-year industry in the United States and Canada—even though, as she summarizes the research, "nonstop recognition does not inspire children to succeed. Instead, it can cause them to underachieve."

Some people have wondered if the self-esteem trend waned after schools began to put more emphasis on testing during the late 1990s. A quick Google search suggests that's not the case, with many schools mentioning self-esteem in their mission statements. And in 2012, my daughter Kate came home from kindergarten with a self-portrait worksheet proclaiming "I'm very happy to be me" and (worse) the same song I use in my talks to illustrate how we teach kids narcissism: "I am special / I am special / Look at me . . ." Kate now knows what (as she pronounces it) "narcissisms" is. (Her definition: "Narcissism is when you fart and then say, "I rule!")

Parenting books and magazines stress self-esteem as much as ever, and a large number of schools continue to use self-esteem programs. The mission statements of many schools explicitly announce that they aim to raise students' self-esteem. A Google search for *elementary school mission statement self-esteem* yielded 2.9 million Web pages in February 2014. These schools are lo-

cated across the country, in cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas. "Building," "improving," "promoting," or "developing" self-esteem is a stated goal of (among many others) Monterrey Elementary School in Carlsbad, New Mexico; Memorial Elementary School in Milford, Massachusetts; James McHenry Elementary in Prince George's County, Maryland; Sechrist Elementary in Flagstaff, Arizona; Randolphville Elementary in Piscataway, New Jersey; Rockhill Elementary in Alliance, Ohio; Haynes Elementary in Lubbock, Texas; and Hume Elementary in Nelson, BC, Canada. Private religious schools are not immune: St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School in Louisville, Kentucky, aims to "help the student discover and develop a positive sense of self-esteem." Jahn World Language School in Chicago raises the bar, adding that students will "exhibit high self-esteem." So self-esteem must not just be promoted by teachers, but must actively be exhibited by students.

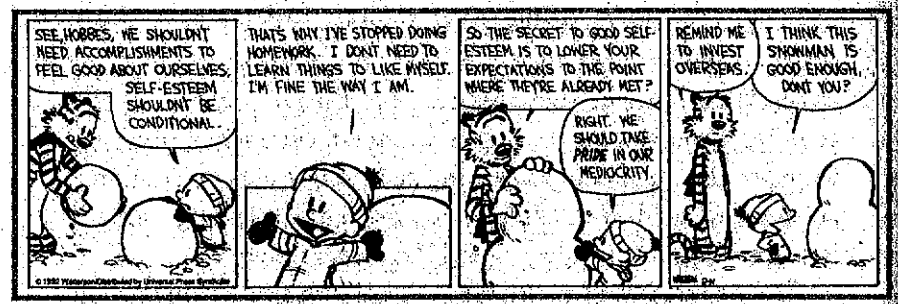
As John Hewitt points out in *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, the implicit message is that self-esteem can be taught and should be taught. When self-esteem programs are used, Hewitt notes, children are "encouraged to believe that it is acceptable and desirable to be preoccupied with oneself [and] praise oneself." In many cases, he says, it's not just encouraged but required. These exercises make self-importance mandatory, demanding of children that they love themselves. "The child must be taught to like himself or herself. . . . The child must take the teacher's attitude himself or herself—'I am somebody!' 'I am capable and loving!'—regardless of what the child thinks."

Most of these programs encourage children to feel good about themselves for no particular reason. In one program, teachers are told to discourage children from saying things like "I'm a good soccer player" or "I'm a good singer." This makes self-esteem contingent on performance, the program authors chide. Instead, "we want to anchor self-esteem firmly to the child . . . so that no matter what the performance might be, the self-esteem remains

high." In other words, feeling good about yourself is more important than good performance. Children, the guide says, should be taught "that it is who they are, not what they do, that is important." Many programs encourage self-esteem even when things go wrong or the child does something bad. In one activity, children are asked to finish several sentences, including ones beginning "I love myself even though . . ." and "I forgive myself for . . ."

Teacher training courses often emphasize that a child's self-esteem must be preserved above all else. A sign on the wall of one university's education department says WE CHOOSE TO FEEL SPECIAL AND WORTHWHILE NO MATTER WHAT. Perhaps as a result, 60% of teachers and 69% of school counselors agree that self-esteem should be raised by "providing more unconditional validation of students based on who they are rather than how they perform or behave." Unconditional validation, to translate the educational mumbo jumbo, means feeling good about yourself no matter how you act or whether you learn anything or not. Although unconditional love from a parent has many benefits, unconditional validation of yourself may not be quite as positive. A veteran second-grade teacher in Tennessee disagrees with this practice but sees it everywhere. "We handle children much more delicately," she says. "They feel good about themselves for no reason. We've given them this cotton-candy sense of self with no basis in reality."

Although the self-esteem approach sounds as if it might be especially popular in liberal blue-state areas, it's common in red states as well, perhaps because it's similar to the ideas popularized by fundamentalist Christian churches. For example, the popular Christian children's book *You Are Special* promotes the same unconditional self-esteem emphasized in secular school programs. First published in 1997, the book notes, "The world tells kids, 'You're special if . . . you have the brains, the looks, the talent.' God tells them, 'You're special just because. No qualifications necessary.' Every child you know needs to hear this one, reassuring



Calvin knows exactly why the notion of unconditional self-esteem is so popular: it feels good and requires little work.

truth." Traditional religion, however, did have "qualifications" and rules for behavior. Adults hear this message of self-esteem as well. In an article in *Ladies' Home Journal*, Christian author Rick Warren writes, "You can believe what others say about you, or you can believe in yourself as does God, who says you are truly acceptable, lovable, valuable, and capable."

Even programs not specifically focused on self-esteem often place the utmost value on children's self-feelings. Children in some schools sing songs with lyrics like "Who I am makes a difference and all our dreams can come true" and "We are beautiful, magnificent, courageous, outrageous, and great!" Other students pen a "Me Poem" or write a mock TV commercial advertising themselves and their good qualities. The children's museum in Laramie, Wyoming, has a self-esteem exhibit where children are told to describe themselves using positive adjectives.

Parents often continue the self-esteem lessons their children have learned in school, perhaps because more children are planned and cherished. The debut of the birth control pill in the early 1960s began the trend toward wanted children, which continued in the early 1970s as abortion became legal and cultural values shifted toward children as a choice rather than a duty. In the 1950s, it was considered selfish not to have kids, but by the

1970s it was an individual decision. As a result, more and more children were born to people who really wanted to become parents. Parents were able to lavish more attention on each child as the average number of children per family shrank from four to two. This parental attention has many benefits, but it may also have resulted in a hothouse environment of specialness. Young people often say that their parents believed in building self-esteem. "My mom constantly told me how special I was," said Natalie, 19. "No matter how I did, she would tell me I was the best." Kristen, 22, said her parents had a "wonderful" way of "telling me what a great job I did and repeatedly telling me I was a very special person." The problem: "I think I am a special person" is one of the items on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory.

Popular media has also promoted this idea endlessly, offering up self-esteem as the cure for just about everything. In one episode of the family drama *7th Heaven*, one young character asks what can be done about war. The father on the show, a minister, says, "We can take a good look in the mirror, and when we see peace, that's when we'll have peace on earth." The rest of the episode features each character smiling broadly to himself or herself in the mirror. In other words, if we all just loved ourselves enough, it would put an end to war. (Not only is this tripe, but wars, if anything, are usually rooted in too much love of self, land, and nation—not too little.) But, as TV and movies have taught us, loving yourself is more important than anything else.

These efforts have had their intended impact. In *Souls in Transition*, Christian Smith concludes that the 18-to-23-year-olds he interviewed in 2008 "are as a group some of the most optimistic people we have ever encountered or listened to—at least when it comes to their own personal lives and futures." In a CBS News poll, the high school graduates of 2000 (the first wave of GenMe) were asked, "What makes you feel positive about yourself?" The most popular answer, at 33%, was the tautological "self-esteem." School performance was a distant second at 18%, with popularity

third at 13%. Yet this is not surprising: saying that having self-esteem makes you feel positive about yourself—forget any actual reason—is exactly what the self-esteem programs have taught today's young generation since they were in kindergarten.

Yet when everyone wears a shirt that says I'M SPECIAL, as some of the programs encourage, it is a wide-open invitation to parody. The 1997 premier episode of MTV's animated show *Daria* features a character named Jane, who cracks, "I like having low self-esteem. It makes me feel special." Later in the episode, the teacher of a "self-esteem class" asks the students to "make a list of ten ways the world would be a sadder place if you weren't in it." "Is that if we'd never been born, or if we died suddenly and unexpectedly?" asks one of the students. Wanting to get out of the rest of the class, Daria and Jane recite the answers to the self-esteem "test": "The next time I start to feel bad about myself [I will] stand before the mirror, look myself in the eye, and say, 'You are special. No one else is like you.'"

By the time GenMe gets to college, these messages are rote. John Hewitt, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts, says his students are excited when they begin discussing self-esteem in his sociology class. But once he begins to question the validity of self-esteem, the students' faces become glum and interest wanes. Hewitt compares it to what might happen in church if a priest suddenly began questioning the existence of God. After all, we worship at the altar of self-esteem and self-focus. "When the importance of self-esteem is challenged, a major part of the contemporary American view of the world is challenged," Hewitt writes.

GIRLS ARE GREAT

It is no coincidence that the *Daria* episode parodying self-esteem programs features two girls. Feminist Gloria Steinem, who spent the 1970s and 1980s fighting for practical rights such as equal pay and maternity leave, spent the early 1990s promoting her book

Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem. In 1991, a study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) announced that girls "lose their self-esteem on the way to adolescence." This study was covered in countless national news outlets and ignited a national conversation about teenage girls and how they feel about themselves. *Reviving Ophelia*, a bestselling book on adolescent girls, popularized this idea further, documenting the feelings of self-doubt girls experience as they move through junior high and high school. Apparently, girls' self-esteem was suffering a severe blow when they became teenagers, and we needed to do something about it.

Before long, programs such as the Girl Scouts began to focus on self-esteem through their "Girls Are Great" program. Girls could earn badges like "Being My Best" and "Understanding Yourself and Others." Amanda, 22, says that her Girl Scout troop spent a lot of time on self-esteem. "We did workshops and earned badges based around self-esteem-building projects," she says. "We learned that we could do anything we wanted, that it was good to express yourself, and being different is good." (I spent 10 years as a Girl Scout myself, but what I remember most is getting good and dirty on camping trips, which may have been more beneficial than any self-esteem program.)

In 2002, the Girl Scout Council paired with corporate sponsor Unilever to launch "Uniquely ME!"—a self-esteem program to "address the critical nationwide problem of low self-esteem among adolescent and preadolescent girls." The program includes three booklets for girls ages 8 to 14, each including exercises on "recognizing one's strengths and best attributes" and "identifying core values and personal interests."

However, there is little evidence that girls' self-esteem dives at adolescence. The AAUW study was seriously flawed, relying on unstandardized measures and exaggerating small differences. In 1999, a carefully researched, comprehensive study of sex differences in self-esteem was published in *Psychological Bulletin*,

the most prestigious journal in the field. The study statistically summarized 216 previous studies on more than 97,000 people and concluded that the sex difference in self-esteem was fairly small—about 56% of men have higher self-esteem than the average woman. Exaggerating this difference might be unwise. "We may create a self-fulfilling prophecy for girls by telling them they'll have low self-esteem," said University of Wisconsin professor Janet Hyde, one of the study authors.

When Keith Campbell and I did a different analysis of 355 studies of 105,318 people, we also found that girls' self-esteem does not fall precipitously at adolescence; it just doesn't rise as fast as boys' self-esteem during the teen years. By college, the difference between men's and women's self-esteem was small. Another meta-analysis, by my former student Brenda Dolan-Pascoe, found that girls did have significantly lower appearance self-esteem, but that girls and boys scored about the same in academic self-esteem. Girls also scored higher than boys in behavior self-esteem and moral-ethical self-esteem. The achievements of adolescent girls also contradict the idea that they retreat into self-doubt: girls earn higher grades than boys at all school levels, and more earn college degrees.

In other words, adolescent girls don't have a self-esteem problem—there is no "critical nationwide problem of low self-esteem among adolescent and preadolescent girls" as the Girl Scouts claimed. But in a culture obsessed with feeling good about ourselves, even the hint of a self-esteem deficit is enough to prompt a nationwide outcry. The Girl Scout program premiered three years after the 1999 comprehensive study found a minuscule sex difference in self-esteem. Why let an overwhelming mass of data get in the way of a program that sounded good?

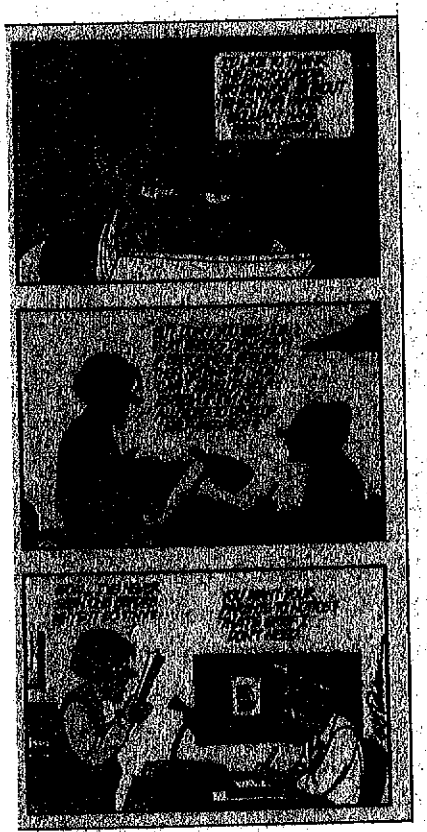
AN EDUCATION IN SELF-ESTEEM

There has also been a movement against "criticizing" children too much. Some schools and teachers don't correct children's mistakes, afraid that this will damage children's self-esteem. One popular method tells teachers not to correct students' spelling or grammar, arguing that kids should be "independent spellers" so they can be treated as "individuals." (Imagine reading a Web paj wyten useing that filosofy.) Teacher-education courses emphasize that creating a positive atmosphere is more important than correcting mistakes. A British teacher proposed eliminating the word *fail* from education; instead of hearing that they have failed, students should hear that they have "deferred success."

The emphasis on positive feedback to students has had another widespread effect: grade inflation. The number of "A students" has nearly doubled. Only 19% of high school graduates boasted an A average in 1976, compared to 37% of 2012 graduates. This wasn't due to improved performance, as standardized-test scores were unchanged or down. It also wasn't due to increased study time—21% of 2012 high school seniors said they studied 10 or more hours a week, compared to 23% in 1976. Entering college students show the same trend: 50% graduated high school with an A average, compared to only 19% in 1966. "Each year we think [the number with an A average] can't inflate any more. And then it does again. The C grade is almost a thing of the past," noted Alexander Astin, the former head of the American Freshman study. College students report studying for fewer hours in recent years: only 38% of American college freshmen in 2012 reported studying six or more hours a week during their last year of high school, compared to 47% in 1987. So why are they still getting better grades? "Teachers want to raise the self-esteem and feel-good attitudes of students," explains Howard Everson of the College Board. We have become a Lake Wobegon nation: all of our children are above average.

Many Generation Me students would instead believe that their substandard work deserved an A. Trudeau's comment on grade inflation in the service of self-esteem mirrors the views of many psychologists and education experts critical of the self-esteem movement.

The results of these policies have played out in schools around the country. Emily, 8, came home from school one day proud that she got half of the words right on her spelling test (in other words, a grade of 50). When her mother pointed out that this wasn't good, Emily replied that her teacher had said it was just fine. At 11-year-old Kayla's school near Dallas, Texas, she was invited to the math-class pizza party as a reward for making a good grade,



even though she had managed only a barely passing 71. The pizza parties used to be only for children who made A's, but in recent years the school has invited every child who simply passed.

As education professor Maureen Stout notes, many educational psychologists believe that schools should be "places in which children are insulated from the outside world and emotionally—not intellectually—nourished. . . . My colleagues always referred to the importance of making kids feel good about themselves but rarely, if ever, spoke of achievement, ideals, goals, character, or decency." The future teachers whom Stout was educating believed that "children shouldn't be challenged to try things that others in the class are not ready for, since that would promote competition, and competition is bad for self-esteem. Second, grading should be avoided if at all possible, but, if absolutely necessary, should be done in a way that avoids any indication that Johnny is anything less than a stellar pupil."

Grade inflation and lack of competition may be backfiring: in 2012, 38% of college freshmen reported that they were frequently bored in class during their last year of high school, up from 29% in 1985. This is not surprising: How interesting could school possibly be when there's little reward for stellar performance? If one-third

of the students are getting A's, why put in the extra effort to be in the top 5 or 10%?

This emphasis on praise may be one reason why teachers and managers are noticing that GenMe has a difficult time with criticism. Employers, get ready for a group of easily hurt young workers. I've learned not to discuss test items that the majority of students missed, as this invariably leads to lots of whiny defensiveness and little actual learning. The two trends are definitely related: research shows that when people with high self-esteem are criticized, they became unfriendly, rude, and uncooperative, even toward people who had nothing to do with the criticism. Stephen Lippman quotes an e-mail from a college student who was upset that he couldn't take a class because he had not satisfied a prerequisite. "Do you really think it is absolutely necessary to require the completion of Soc151 to remain in this class? You're not teaching Finance 400, buddy. You teach Women's Studies. . . . But I guess if requiring the completion of a prereq makes you or the class you teach seem more important, then go ahead." The end of this e-mail is especially fascinating, as the student assumes the professor has the same motivation he apparently does: to "seem more important." This echoes a student I overheard recently on campus: "I think he makes the tests hard so he can feel smart."

Students also expect A's—or else. When I gave one student an A- on her class presentation, she immediately went to rate myprofessors.com and posted the comment "worst professor I've ever had!" Another, who received an A- in the class, wrote a long e-mail beginning, "I believe that I deserve an A in the course. I was marked down for things on both my paper and my presentation that I do not feel I should have been." She demanded that we meet in person to discuss changing her grade. After much back-and-forth about the university grade-change policy, I replied that I would not change the grade, but would be happy to provide further feedback on her paper. After writing back 12 previous times, she never replied to that offer. (And this was four years

after the first edition of *Generation Me* was published—students clearly don't get the irony.)

I'm not alone. Lippman quotes an e-mail from an undergraduate unhappy with the B+ she received: "To me, if a student does/hands in all assignments, misses class no more than two times, participates during lecture, takes notes, attentively watches videos, and obviously observes/notes sociology in his/her life," she wrote, "it would make sense for that student to receive a respectable grade—an A." Notice that good performance is never mentioned—instead, the student is asking for an A for showing up. She has company—in a 2008 survey, 66% of college students agreed that "if I have explained to my professor that I am trying hard, I think he/she should give me some consideration with respect to my course grade." One-third agreed that "if I have attended most classes for a course, I deserve at least a grade of B." Thirty percent said "professors who won't let me take an exam at a different time because of my personal plans (e.g., a vacation or other trip that is important to me) are too strict," and 32% complained that "teachers often give me lower grades than I deserve on paper assignments." A LexisNexis search of print media shows a sixfold increase from 1996 to 2006 in the joint appearance of the terms *sense of entitlement* and *students*.

None of this should surprise us. Students "look and act like what the [self-esteem] theories say they should look and act like," notes Hewitt. "They tend to act as though they believe they have worthy and good inner essences, regardless of what people say or how they behave, that they deserve recognition and attention from others, and their unique individual needs should be considered first and foremost." This is exactly what has happened: GenMe'ers take for granted that the self comes first and often believe exactly what they were so carefully taught—that they're special.

When *Time* magazine labeled Millennials the "Me Me Me generation," one of the most common reactions was, in sum, "But

we are awesome!" A *USA Today* article concluded, "Guess what? Twentysomethings aren't apologizing. They say it's a good thing." Matt Prince, 29, said, "I think it's true what they're saying—I just don't think it's as negative as it initially sounds. Our generation is so successful, there's a feeling of 'You know what? I do deserve this and should be able to do something to make me happy.'"

SELF-ESTEEM AND PERFORMANCE

But this must have an upside; surely kids who have high self-esteem go on to make better grades and achieve more in school. Actually, they don't. There is a small correlation between self-esteem and grades. However, self-esteem does not cause high grades—instead, high grades cause higher self-esteem. So self-esteem programs clearly put the cart before the horse in trying to increase self-esteem. Even much of the small link from high grades to high self-esteem can be explained by other factors such as income: rich kids, for example, have higher self-esteem and get better grades, but that's because coming from an affluent home causes both of these things, and not because they cause each other. This resembles the horse and the cart being towed on a flatbed truck—neither the cart nor the horse is causing the motion in the other even though they are moving together. As self-esteem programs aren't going to make all kids rich, they won't raise self-esteem this way either.

Here's an example that illustrates this finding. Which ethnic group in the United States has the lowest self-esteem? It's Asian Americans, and Asian American young people have the highest academic performance of any ethic group. Asian American adults have the lowest unemployment rate and the highest median income. Instead of focusing on self-esteem, Asian cultures tend to emphasize hard work—probably the reason their performance is better. This strongly suggests that the modern American idea that self-belief is crucial for success is not correct.

Yet try convincing GenMe of this. When I first began giving talks to undergraduates suggesting that their generation was more self-confident, even more narcissistic, than their predecessors, I was afraid they wouldn't buy it. Instead, their reaction was a collective shrug—yeah, we know, they would say. But when I told them that self-esteem does not cause success, suddenly they were skeptical. It was as if I'd told them the world was flat. In one classroom at Southern Connecticut State University, one young woman said, "At the end of the day I love me and I don't think that's wrong. I don't think it's a problem, having most people love themselves. I love me." Another said, "I am a narcissist—and that helps me succeed. I'm interviewing for jobs right now, and it helps me stand out."

Except it doesn't. Narcissists are not any more successful, beautiful, or intelligent than anyone else—they just think they are. Inflated self-belief, in the end, is a bust.

Nor does high self-esteem protect against teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, drug abuse, or chronic welfare dependency. Several comprehensive reviews of the research literature by different authors have all concluded that self-esteem doesn't cause much of anything. Even the book sponsored by the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, which spent a quarter of a million dollars trying to raise Californians' self-esteem, found that self-esteem doesn't cause academic achievement, good behavior, or any other outcome the Task Force was formed to address.

Perhaps this emphasis on individualism and uniqueness has other benefits, though—say, in more creativity. However, Kyung Hee Kim of the College of William & Mary found that the opposite was the case—younger generations are actually significantly less creative. Drawing from 272,599 children, teens, and adults who completed the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, the standard objective measure of creativity, she found that

creative-thinking scores declined between 1966 and 2008, and especially since 1990. She concluded, "Over the last 30 years, (1) people of all ages, kindergarteners through adults, have been steadily losing their ability to elaborate upon ideas and detailed and reflective thinking; (2) people are less motivated to be creative; and (3) creativity is less encouraged by home, school, and society overall." How can this be when uniqueness is emphasized so much? Perhaps people want to be unique, but cannot translate that desire into actual creative thinking. Kim points to the increased emphasis on standardized testing and the increased use of "electronic entertainment devices" as possible causes for the decline in creativity.

ARE SELF-ESTEEM PROGRAMS GOOD OR BAD?

Psychologist Martin Seligman has criticized self-esteem programs as empty and shortsighted. He argues that self-esteem based on nothing does not serve children well in the long run; it's better, he says, for children to develop skills and feel good about accomplishing something. Roy F. Baumeister, the lead author of an extensive review of the research on self-esteem, found that self-esteem does not lead to better grades, improved work performance, decreased violence, or less cheating. In fact, people with high self-esteem are often more violent and more likely to cheat. "It is very questionable whether [the few benefits] justify the effort and expense that schools, parents and therapists have put into raising self-esteem," Baumeister writes. "After all these years, I'm sorry to say, my recommendation is this: forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline."

Self-esteem is an outcome, not a cause. It doesn't do much good to encourage a child to feel good about himself just to feel good; this doesn't mean anything. Children develop true self-esteem from behaving well and accomplishing things. "What the self-esteem movement really says to students is that their

achievement is not important and their minds are not worth developing," writes Maureen Stout. It's clearly better for children to value learning rather than simply feeling good.

So should kids feel bad about themselves if they're not good at school or sports? No. They should feel bad if they didn't work hard and try. Even if they don't succeed, sometimes negative feelings can be a motivator. Trying something challenging and learning from the experience is better than feeling good about oneself for no reason. It's also important not to confuse self-esteem or overconfidence with self-efficacy, the belief that you can do something. That's very different from simply thinking you're great. Self-efficacy is more external—it's about trying something and seizing opportunities—and, unlike self-esteem, it is actually linked to success.

Also, everyone can do something well. Kids who are not athletic or who struggle with school might have another talent, such as music or art. Almost all children can take pride in being a good friend or helping someone. Kids can do many things to feel good about themselves, so self-esteem can be based on something. If a child feels great about himself even when he does nothing, why do anything? Self-esteem without basis encourages laziness rather than hard work. On the other hand, we shouldn't go too far and hinge our self-worth entirely on one external goal, such as getting good grades. As psychologist Jennifer Crocker documents, the seesaw of self-esteem this produces can lead to poor physical and mental health. A happy medium is what's called for here: don't feel that you are a complete failure because of one bad grade—just don't feel good about yourself if you didn't even study. Use your negative feelings as a motivator to do better next time. True self-confidence comes from honing your talents and learning things, not from being told you're great just because you exist.

Don Forsyth and his colleagues decided to directly test the effects of self-esteem boosting. College students who made low grades on their first exam in a psychology class were randomly

assigned to receive study tips (the control group) or study tips plus a self-esteem boost such as "Hold your head—and your self-esteem—high" (the experimental group). So did the self-esteem boost help their performance on the final exam? No, it actually hurt their performance—the self-esteem-boosting group scored significantly lower on the final than the control group. They did excel in one area, however: they were more likely to say they felt "good about myself as a student in Psychology 101."

The practice of not correcting mistakes, avoiding letter grades, and discouraging competition is also misguided. Competition can help make learning fun; as Stout points out, look at how the disabled kids in the Special Olympics benefit from competing. Many schools now don't publish the honor roll of children who do well in school and generally downplay grades because, they falsely believe, competition isn't good for self-esteem (as some kids won't make the honor roll, and some kids will make C's). But can you imagine not publishing the scores of a basketball game because it might not be good for the losing team's self-esteem? Can you imagine not keeping score in the game? What fun would that be? The self-esteem movement, Stout argues, is popular because it is sweetly addictive: teachers don't have to criticize, kids don't have to be criticized, and everyone goes home feeling happy. The problem is they also go home with an unrealistically inflated sense of self.

Kids who don't excel in a certain area should still be encouraged to keep trying. This isn't self-esteem, however: it's self-control. Self-control, or the ability to persevere and keep going, is a much better predictor of life outcomes than self-esteem. Children high in self-control make better grades and finish more years of education, and they're less likely to use drugs or have a teenage pregnancy. Self-control predicts all of those things researchers had hoped self-esteem would, but hasn't.

Cross-cultural studies provide a good example of the benefits of self-control over self-esteem. When Asian students find out

they did badly on something, they want to keep working on it so they can improve their performance. White American students, in contrast, prefer to give up and work on something else, preserving their self-esteem at the expense of doing better at a difficult task. This goes a long way toward explaining why Asian children perform better at math and at school in general.

Young people who have high self-esteem built on shaky foundations might run into trouble when they encounter the harsh realities of the real world. Kids who are given meaningless A's and promoted when they haven't learned the material will later find out in college or the working world that they don't know much at all. What will that do to their self-esteem, or, more important, their careers? Your boss isn't going to care much about preserving your high self-esteem. The self-esteem emphasis leaves kids ill prepared for the inevitable criticism and occasional failure that is real life. "There is no self-esteem movement in the work world," points out one father. "If you present a bad report at the office, your boss isn't going to say, 'Hey, I like the color paper you chose.' Setting kids up like this is doing them a tremendous disservice."

In any educational program, one has to consider the trade-off between benefit and risk. Valuing self-esteem over learning and accomplishment is clearly harmful, as children feel great about themselves but are cheated out of the education they need to succeed. Self-esteem programs might benefit the small minority of kids who really do feel worthless, but those kids are likely to have bigger problems that self-esteem boosting won't fix. The risk in these programs is in inflating the self-concept of children who already think the world revolves around them. Building up the self-esteem and importance of kids who are already egocentric can bring trouble, as it can lead to narcissism—and maybe it already has.