



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Helping Your Child Develop a Healthy Self-Esteem – Part 2

Guest(s): Dr. Gary Sibcy

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: What does it really mean for a child to have a healthy self-worth? What does it look like when a child or adolescent has a low self-esteem and are we as parents influential on our child's view of themselves? I'm Roger Marsh and today on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we're going to be answering those questions. On yesterday's program our cohost, Dr. Tim Clinton began an important conversation with his good friend, Dr. Gary Sibcy. They discussed a parent's crucial role in molding their child's emotional intelligence and spiritual capacity in order for them to thrive in today's fast paced world.

Today, there'll be continuing this discussion and sharing more insights for parents and adults who influence the lives of today's youth. Dr. Gary is a professor of counselor education and supervision at Liberty University. He's a licensed clinical psychologist and the author of several books, including *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel and Act the Way You Do* and *Loving Your Child Too Much*. Let's join Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Gary Sibcy right now on today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, fantastic discussion yesterday on really, self-esteem, self-concept, stress and anxiety in our kids. I can't think of a more important subject right now than this one for mom and dad's to be dialed into.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Now, I think you're absolutely right; that we, absolutely, as parents need to take seriously our kids' self-esteem, how we build it, and then how do we know when it's not necessarily going the right way? What kind of things are impacting it? And these are things from the outside, but also things on the inside. How do we, as parents, help them build those things? What are some of the best parenting practices that parents engage in that we know will promote strong, healthy, enduring self-esteem? That's the critical question here.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, we established yesterday that growing up, there are a lot of tasks and challenges that our kids have to navigate. Our goal as parents is to help love on them and help launch them into this big old world. Kids are asking and

answering questions along the way here, such as, "Who am I? How do I fit in? How do I measure up? What am I going to do?" And out of it often comes a lot of comparison with other kids. They can develop strong or healthy feelings about themselves, or they can develop feelings of, or thoughts of inferiority and more. Gary, some of the signs or symptoms of kids who are in trouble, say struggling, with their sense of self, their worth or value. The anxiety piece often is affiliated when they have low self-concept, low self-esteem.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Well, and this is especially the case if there's a big change in this. There's some kids who come out of the womb and they have difficulties with sleep and eating and getting regulated, and they can be grumpy and irritable and have difficulty concentrating, all of that sort of stuff. But if your child's kind of been developing on a normal basis, and then you see a change in their mood, where they're very irritable and they're grumpy and they're grouchy and they start to withdraw and isolate. Those are warning signs. Other things we call this "the dashboard for parents," Are kids going to school? Not wanting to go to school. Well, that's not a good sign. If your child... That you see a sudden change in their grades. They start getting in trouble at school and you start getting detentions or referrals. These are obviously signs of problems. And also, are your kids making friends? That's an important piece. Do other kids like them? Were they once popular and now they're not so popular? Those kinds of changes...

Dr. Tim Clinton: They get humiliated or embarrassed by coach somebody who is insensitive to what's going on. They go through a loss in their life. Maybe they lose someone close like grandpa or someone who meant something really important to them. Gary too, getting caught in something. And they lose their whole "identity" in front of all their peers.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Humiliation. Yeah, that's huge.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I saw this piece, National Institutes of Mental Health said 32% of kids, this is pre-pandemic, struggle with anxiety disorders. What I found interesting there too, was girls tend to struggle more with anxiety than boys do. And Gary, there's also a strong correlation of depression going in there. And there was this 2019 study of school-aged children. Here's what they said, and this is the linkage here; "self-esteem is often associated with anxiety and depression and academic stress."

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Yeah, no, that's an important piece too. That obviously parents want their kids to do well. They want them to excel. And so there is a fair amount of pressure that we can put on our kids to perform. And now believe me, that kids sometimes over estimate how much you want them to succeed. But they take this stuff very seriously, so you can have kids who really put tremendous amount of pressure on themselves to not just get good grades, but to be the best. And again, this is a self-esteem issue; that you have to be the best to be important. That's a critical question that we have to sit down and talk to our kids about. To be average means that you're as good as 50% of the kids. And a lot of kids actually think that they have to be like 90th percentile; they got to be better than almost everybody in the whole class in order to be something.

And you have to offset some of these messages that you see in the media. If you think about it, if you lose the Superbowl your second best in the country, but you're still kind of a loser. That's the way we think of it. And so we need to have those conversations to offset that. But that's a huge piece of just how much pressure kids have to perform.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And a concerning piece here too, Gary, is when kids start getting into this spin. When they begin to struggle in how they see themselves in the world around them. They tend to withdraw. They tend to get lost. They tend to get confused. And when they do Gary, it only reinforces then the spin they're in and they go further. They struggle believing that you're really there for them, that you genuinely care about them. And this is where we start talking to them spiritually. They don't think God views them as valuable or worthy. And so they disconnect from the Lord. What really concerns me is when they start that self-loathing piece, Gary. That's what's sad.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Well, and see what happens is then they're beating themselves up, they're putting themselves down, which obviously this creates a lot of emotional pain. Now, at the core is this low self-esteem. And then the low self-esteem leads to all these negative feelings: anxiety, depression, irritability, feeling hopeless. And then you get a layer of negative behaviors that you use to try to offset these feelings and so that creates a whole other set of problems.

Dr. Tim Clinton: If you don't think this is an important subject, listen to this: low self-esteem can actually trigger higher levels of stress and anxiety with kids, which produces increased sleeplessness, other health related issues, et cetera. Low self-esteem then is highly correlated also then with drug abuse or getting caught up in relationships out there to try to find value. Where there's sexual activity promiscuity and more.

One more piece here, Gary, research on the brain: the brains of those who have low self-worth were up to one fifth smaller than those who felt good about themselves. Neuroscience is showing us this too. The possibility of repetitive, negative thinking about self and the world around me actually causing diminishing brain function and size. What do you make of that?

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Well, there's different parts of the brain that are involved in different patterns of thinking. And there's two patterns of thinking that we're interested in that come out of low self-esteem. One of them is rumination. So, when you ruminate, you keep thinking over and over about what's wrong with you and you keep recalling things where you failed, where you've come up short and you keep asking yourself, "Why? Why me? Why is this happening to me? Why doesn't anybody like me? Why can't I do this? Why can't I do that?"

That pattern of thinking you get stuck in. There's particular parts of the brain that are indicated in this, so you use a lot of that brain structure for that. Now another type of thinking that you get stuck in is worry, and worry is more future oriented. "What if this? What if that? What if this? What if that? Oh, no. What if

this happens? What if that happens?" And as a result, this creates a lot of anxiety. So the two tend to go hand in hand, they come out of two different parts of the brain. But what we know is that this is mostly regulated in the lower parts of the brain. If that part of your brain is constantly engaged, it creates stress. The interesting thing about stress is that you get chemicals like cortisol that gets released in the brain and it causes it to actually break down some of the connections in the higher parts of the brain. So the cortisol, basically, flooded brain from this kind of thinking just keeps adding stress. Stress creates cortisol and cortisol shrinks the brain.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You're listening to Family Talk, a division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, your host. Our special in-studio guest, Dr. Gary Sibcy, clinical psychologist, head of the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program at Liberty University he's also engaged in private practice at Piedmont Psychiatric Services here with Virginia Baptist Hospital. Gary is... He's an amazing clinician. He works with a lot of broken families trying to restore a lot of what we're talking about here today. We're going to spend the rest of our program talking about what can parents do.

Let's start with the issue of being a part of their life. You talk about the significance of relationships. I don't think parents really understand how important it is that they get connected emotionally with their kids. You've got to be able to have these hard conversations, "Honey, Where are you at?" And "What's going on?" "Dad, I hate this."

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Now there's a lot of parts to a relationship and one of them though is just the time factor. That you need to find that time on a daily basis to spend with your child that is not about school, it's not about cleaning the room. It's not about just trying to get them back and forth to where they need to be. So don't mistake the time that you spend in the minivan, tracking them back and forth to swim practice, as the kind of time that we're talking about. You need to find pockets of time that's just you and that child, engaging in some kind of activity that you both enjoy. Or I tell parents, "It doesn't have to be an activity you both enjoyed. It has to be one that your child enjoys and you learn to enjoy it, because they do."

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, a lot of the healing journey that we work with broken families on is getting them connected again, relationally. And if we could see that, Dan Siegel calls it "the power of showing up," how significant that is. Dr. Dobson for years has said, "listen, you've got to be present and emotionally engaged in the lives of your children. If you don't, there's a consequence for it."

Dr. Gary Sibcy: And Dr. Dobson's wisdom on this was way before it's time. Present doesn't just mean in the room. Present means that you're emotionally there.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And they know you're there.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Right. It's not, the lights are on nobody's home. The lights are on, you're engaged. Your mind is with them and what they're doing and you're setting... And this is a hard thing because it requires a discipline, you're setting all the other things that you have aside to be present with them in these little moments.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, we talk often about special time. Russell Barkley, other leaders in the field of oppositional defiance disorder, ADHD, talk about the significance of finding 15 to 20 minutes a day, or as often as you can each week and stepping into the life of your child. Because when you do, it creates a bondedness. There's something that goes on during that special time. Address that real quick for us. Mom and Dad, hear this; this is critical.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Time and time again, if I'm going to help parents help their child who's having problems with defiance and ADHD and these sorts of things, is that we have to have that 15, 20 minute, at least three to four times a week, that's planned. So it doesn't just happen spontaneously; it's planned, so your child is looking for it. Okay? And they can't lose it. We don't want our child to think that if they have a bad day at school, they lose special time. That doesn't make sense. It's there, no matter what. And then during that 15, 20 minutes, you're engaging in some kind of play activity or activity that your child wants to engage in. Whether they want to shoot basketball, kick a soccer ball, they want to play cards, they play checkers; just engage them. And in this time, you're not giving them directions, you're not teaching them anything. It's just simply being present and engaging them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Because it says to them, they're important.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Exactly.

Dr. Tim Clinton: There's communication. That takes place between the two of you.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: There are lessons being learned about what's important, what's not important.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: So let me give you something that's really practical: so one of the things I encourage parents to do is that when you sit down and dinner, you do high point and low point. So you go around the table and everybody gives their high point and then their low point. What was the high point? What was the low point? And why? And this is a nice way for everybody to get involved in each other's lives and hear what happened that was good, what was not so good. So practice that a little bit. That's a nice little conversational piece. And by the way, as a parent, you do it too. What was your high point? What was your low point? See if you can get your kids involved in each other's conversations and each other's worlds. That's what goes on at the dinner table.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Secondly Gary, address the issues. In other words, the lies that kids often begin to believe about themselves and the world around them. Have those tough conversations.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Well, and as we said, now don't start with the tough conversations if you don't have a relationship, because the kids will just shut you down. They won't have it. So you got to work on the relationship side first.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Because they really don't think you care.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: They don't think that you care. And they think that you're just going to try to take over the conversation, tell them what to do. So you have to learn the art of just good conversation. Which is first, "Tell me what happened." Get your child to give you their version of what happened and learn to listen to it, and then just summarize it back and make sure that you heard it right. That's step one.

Step two is you ask them, "If you are going to be in this situation again, and if you were going to try to handle it any differently, would you? What could you have done otherwise?" Have them do the problem solving. Don't tell them what they should have done, because they'll shut you down and they won't listen to you. So you need to non-judgmentally listen to them and then help them problem solve. Which is, "What could you have done? What would be the consequence?" Whatever they do has consequences and the consequences are things that either the school's going to enforce or you're going to enforce, or life is going to enforce. So don't just impose unnatural consequences, let them discover some of that stuff. Obviously-

Dr. Tim Clinton: And Gary, as a part of this process, we're trying to really emphasize maybe; what are your strengths? What are your uniquenesses? What's beautiful in you? What are your gifts? I know that, Gary, sometimes there's a difference or a gap between a parent and a child. Maybe you're very different, maybe you don't really like your child. Do I dare say that? But you better figure out, Gary, what you do like.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: And we talk to parents about that. Remember, kids are amazing observers, but terrible interpreters. So they're going to know if you don't like them. I'm just telling you; they'll read it. Now, you may love them, but you don't like them. But the problem is that your kid doesn't usually have that kind of cognitive sophistication to go, "Well, I know Mama loves me, but she really doesn't like me much." They don't think that complicated. They don't make those subtle distinctions. If they think you don't like them, they think you don't love them. That's just the way that kids think. So if you don't like your child, because there's things about them that really get on your nerves, then that's where you have to start trying to discover what it is about your child that you do like. And it's the special time.

Now, sometimes you have to work with a professional on that to help you step back and figure out what's bugging you. I had a mom one time who really had an incredible dislike for her son and she could not figure it out. And it became pretty obvious that this kid, her son, reminded her of her older brother who literally just picked on her and made her life miserable. And so when she had a daughter and her son started picking on her daughter, all those negative feelings just started flooding back. She didn't understand where they were coming from. But sometimes it's, like I said, it's not always just straight forward and you have to talk to people and see if they can help you figure it out. But that was key is that she was reacting to just the way that she felt about her brother and she wasn't even going to put up with anything that he might do toward her younger daughter.

But it gets complicated. And basically if the relationship between you and your child starts to spoil, if it gets contaminated by whatever it is in their life or your life, you've got to restore that. That's number one, because if you don't restore the relationship, then you don't have a platform to work on that self-esteem. And then once you have the relationship working on the self-esteem, it's getting in there, talking to your kids about what stresses them, and then helping them learn how to problem solve and figure out ways to deal with it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, I want to close this way. Dartmouth Medical School, 260 major studies about young people. Here's what they concluded: kids are hardwired to connect from the cradle to the grave. Josh McDowell, in reviewing that, made this statement, "Build loving relationships with your kids or they'll walk away from the truth." Josh went on to say this, "If you want them to believe the truth about what it means to be loved by God and to have a relationship with him." He said this, "model it." Gary, if we don't get this piece right, imagine the consequence.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: And I talk to parents about that as being an authentic person. You've got to live that life and model that in the way that you relate to your children. Be authentic. Say what you mean, mean what you say, and when you mess up, own it. And then if things go wrong, work on restoring your relationship. But that's all about the authenticity of your life that your kids are going to read. They're going to know if you're authentic or not, by the way that you live your day-to-day life. And if they believe it, then they're going to identify with it. They may not identify it when they're 14 or 15, by the way. It may be when they're 19 or 20, that they start to show back up as really believing it. But ultimately, it's going to have that effect and carry forward.

Dr. Tim Clinton: The younger you start this journey, probably the better the outcome. But we will say this too, it's never too late to step in. There may be a mom or dad listening right now with tears coming down your face and you're saying, "I'm really concerned about my kids. I'm worried about my son. I'm worried about my daughter. And I don't know what to do."

I want to encourage you, step up and into this moment. If you're awkward and clumsy, you don't know how to get it done, seek help. Get wisdom and guidance. That's why Dr. Dobson started a ministry called *Focus on the Family*. That's why he developed the James Dobson Family Institute. It was all about encouraging you to not only know, but to own your influence in the life of your son or daughter, it's everything. And the greatest gift you can give to them. It's wrapped around two words, be there. In other words, that life in Christ; modeling it and the loving like God loves us is everything. Hey, even if they're rejecting it right now, don't quit, because it matters. And they're always watching you.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: That's right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, as we have had this conversation, is the goal of developing healthy self-esteem in our kids just so they can survive and thrive in this rapidly changing world we're living in? Or is it maybe so that this becomes a gift that they in turn give to others in the world around them?

Dr. Gary Sibcy: You know, I think actually it's probably both. Because you need the self-esteem really to thrive. Not that you're always thriving, but you're adapting. So self-esteem is all about the capacity to adapt to the changing world that you're in. That's one.

But ultimately, healthy self-esteem then puts you in a place where you can really relate to people deeply and warmly. You can engage in empathy and connection. You can have really strong relationships at a lot of different places. So it's not just that you got a couple close friends, but that you can make friends at work, you can make friends in your neighborhood, you can make friends at church, and people like being around you. And it's in that context, again, that healthy self-esteem allows you to become an agent that God uses to make a difference in the world. And ultimately that's what the meaning of life is for the Christian; is that God uses you to accomplish his purposes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mom and Dad, we know this, you can't control everything in the life of your son and/or daughter. But what you can do is you can control as much as possible how you're going to relate to them.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: That's right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And what you're going to give to them in that relationship.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: That's right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, the entire team at Family Talk, Gary, thank you for joining us and pray God's continued blessing on your life and your ministry.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Thanks Tim.

Roger Marsh: Fascinating insight from Dr. Gary Sibcy. Now, if you need help or ideas for how to connect with your children, visit our website at drjamesdobson.org. We have lots of resources, tips, and advice for you as you strive to strengthen your relationship with your kids. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. Now, if you'd like to learn more about Dr. Gary Sibcy or the books that he and Dr. Tim Clinton have written together, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/broadcast.

While you're there, you can also listen to any part of today's or yesterday's broadcast that you might've missed. Now, if you'd like to find a Christian counselor near you, visit connect.aacc.net, that's connect.aacc.net. When you're there, you can search for a Christian counselor in your area, and sometimes the best first step to emotional health for you or your child is just making the call and scheduling an appointment. So check out the American association of Christian Counselors resource line connect.aacc.net.

And thanks so much for joining us for this two-part edition of Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, hope you have a blessed day and be sure to join us again next time.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.