



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Helping Your Child Develop a Healthy Self-Esteem – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Gary Sibcy

Air Date: October 4, 2021

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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: Hello there and welcome to this Monday edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and I hope you had a wonderful and hopefully restful weekend. Our cohost, Dr. Tim Clinton, recently sat down with his good friend and colleague Dr. Gary Sibcy to discuss the importance of helping your child develop a healthy view of self. A healthy realistic self-esteem can equip kids for success as they face the challenges of growing up and will also help them on into their adult years as well.

We'll be sharing that conversation with you today here on Family Talk. Dr. Gary Sibcy is a professor of counselor education and supervision at Liberty University. He's a licensed clinical psychologist who has educated, trained, and supervised many mental health caregivers and clinicians throughout his career. Dr. Sibcy is the author of several books, including *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do* and *Loving Your Child Too Much*. Here now is Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Gary Sibcy on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. Tim Clinton: My guest today is good friend clinical psychologist, Dr. Gary Sibcy. Before I introduce Gary, I want to set the table for what I think, what I believe is going to be not only an important, a critical discussion. I'm talking to Gary about our kids and self-esteem. We're also going to add a little bit of conversation about stress and anxiety in their lives. This is going to be a full hour. We've divided this into two parts, day one, day two. In most of the country, the leaves are starting to change colors.

There's a little chill in the air at night or in the morning, my favorite time of the day. If you have school aged kids, you're probably just setting the routine for a new school year. You know the drill, packing lunches, helping with homework, doing extra laundry, shuttling kids to afterschool sports. It's the dance we love to do in this season of life. Cherish it. Don't miss a minute. It goes by so fast.

Whether you homeschool or your child attends public, private, charter school or some sort of hybrid, or your child interacts with peers, coaches, teachers, and

other people in their lives, their self-esteem is being shaped and impacted every day. In fact, a 2015 study from the University of Washington found that a child's self-esteem is established or significantly established by age five.

That means by the time they're in first grade, your child could be one of those confident, well-adjusted little guys or girls who can handle the world they're beginning to be immersed in, or you might have a child who lacks confidence, feels insecure, maybe is a bit timid. The results will speak for themselves. Either way, look, we all get one shot at this. You've got to press in with grace and a keen awareness of what's going on and what's at stake. Mom, dad, you cannot undervalue the impact you're having on your child's self-worth and self-perception.

Don't let that intimidate you. You have a unique opportunity to build their self-esteem, unlike any other person in a child's life as they're growing up. Here today on this topic is my good friend Dr. Gary Sibcy. Gary, welcome into Family Talk. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Gary Sibcy:

Thanks, Tim. Great to be here. This is such an important topic, because the world that we're living in today is just filled with stress like we've never seen before really and changes. Families are really struggling to figure out how they're going to adapt to all the different challenges that are in front of them right now. One of the biggest concerns that parents have is how to help their child just keep the self-esteem, to build their self-esteem, help them to adapt to all these changes that are going on with going back to school, dealing with the stuff around the pandemic.

Just so many different issues that come to play, that our kids get isolated and disconnected from their friends, how do we balance going to school, watching TV, playing video games, being involved in sports, all these kinds of issues that kids bump into and parents are trying to help them navigate. We're seeing it just maybe more than ever before.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Gary, growing up is tough as it is, and parenting kids isn't an easy task. Dr. Dobson for years has talked about how parenting isn't for cowards. You got to step up and into these moments. And by the way, these are opportunities. We get to shape or certainly impact how our kids see themselves and how they're going to launch into this big old world. Gary, you're right, with the lockdowns, the insanity of everyday life, the pandemic mess, the election stuff, go all the way through to the vaccine, and now kids having to wear masks again going into school.

I know there's a lot of debate around that. Is that going to have some type of adverse effect on our children as they "go through development?" A lot of moms and dads are battling in school board meetings and all kinds of things. This is a timely discussion, Gary. Let's step back for a second here. Every mom and dad listening right now... And by the way, this program is going to be for parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, youth leaders, so many.

But Gary, every mom or dad listening right now knows whether or not they're close with their son and/or daughter. God wired us that way. If you would just stop for a moment, say your child's name, and I'll say my daughter Megan, my son Zach, you also kind of got a good sense on how they're doing, are they in trouble, do you worry about them, and more. Gary, isn't it something how God wired that deep inside of us as parents?

Dr. Gary Sibcy:

Well, yeah. I mean, it's so fundamental to who we are that God made it such that the relationship that you have with your child is literally the crucible in which their self-esteem and their identity, what they value, what's important, what they seek after, all those things come out of the quality of the relationship and the relationships that they have in their lives. It didn't happen that we just come out of the womb and we're ready to attack the world.

Just literally the way that our self-esteem in our brain, in our neurobiology develops in the context of these close relationships. We got to be really attuned to how are they operating, right? We want to talk a little bit about some of the tools and some of the things that you can do to just strengthen that relationship if you feel like it's not as strong as it needs to be.

And then some practical things to help your child build that self-esteem and build some skills that they need for dealing with their strong feelings and how to problem solve and how to have a sense of what we call self-efficacy, a sense of being able to set these realistic goals for themselves, but also being able to accomplish them.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Gary, you serve as a professor at Liberty University, head the clinical psychology program there. You also are actively involved in private practice. You see families every day. You're in the life of kids. I think you're one of the best therapists I know. You and I have done a lot of casework together. I refer a lot of people to you, Gary. One of the things that I appreciate is you look at the landscape out there and you say, "Hey, a lot of Christian parents, a lot of parents are getting things right." You say they're loving their kids. They care about them being safe. They put limits and boundaries around them. It's a responsibility. And a lot of parents are getting things right.

Dr. Gary Sibcy:

Oh yeah. I mean, they want to send them to the best schools. They want to make sure that they're in athletics. They want to try to get them into hobbies. They want them to find friends. They go on vacation. They spend time together, and they really try to sit down and eat dinner together and have conversations. These are all really important things. We see parents doing this, I mean, in ways that really maybe in the past they didn't really do. They're getting a lot of things right.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Nevertheless, however, there's a lot of stress and anxiety around our kids. We worry a lot about them, Gary. Even as young adults, even when we launched them, we still often worry. Julie and I have this conversation a lot, but Gary, especially, back this up for a moment, in those teen years. Those teen years

seem to be something special, Gary. And again, this isn't necessarily how we grew up. This is a different world. They've got online. They've got everything coming at them, Gary, and it's a game changer.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Well, yeah. I mean, you start looking at all the different sources of influence on our children, the way they think, right? It's not just coming from you. If they have problems, a lot of times not just looking to the peers that they have at school or on the school bus or kids that they talk to on the phone, but they're being influenced by TikTok and Instagram and Facebook and all these different social media outlets.

Dr. Tim Clinton: They're getting pounded by it.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Right. Right. This sense of stable identity and what you believe and what's important to you, these things are changing landscape. We sometimes refer to this as the saturated self, right? Because there's just so many sources of input. I mean, you think back when our parents were being raised, right? The main sources of input they got from outside of their family really came from like the newspaper and a radio program they would listen to for 30 minutes in the evening, and then it was TV.

We thought TV had all of these effects. But now the number of sources, the number of people who can influence the way that your child thinks about themselves and about the world is just exploding. We have to talk to parents about how do you regulate this, right? Not just sort of take control of it, but you got to be able to regulate it and sort of interact with them about the things that they're seeing. You have to have a relationship, right? One that your child enjoys interacting with you in order to do this.

We always have to highlight for parents the importance of maintaining that connection. Because if you don't, then they're going to be out there on the sea of social media being influenced by all kinds of different ideas.

Dr. Tim Clinton: They are, and they're asking and answering questions every day. For example, how they see themselves. Are they getting picked on? Are they getting lost? Do they have good friends? This journey of identity is crucial. When you teach undergraduate students, graduate students, doctoral students in childhood development, you talk about this phase in the teenage years, in particular, of asking and answering these questions. They want to see how they fit into the world. And that's a critical, difficult journey.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: What parents realize is that we know a lot is going on inside the brain in the first couple of years of life. But then when you get to adolescence, there's what Dan Siegel refers to as the brainstorm, right? I mean, there's a whole new sort of explosion in the brain of neurochemistry and biology going on and hormones floating around that shaped the way that your kids feel and how they react to

things. As that as the backdrop, then as teenagers, they're also learning to think...

One of the hard things about teenagers is that they start to realize that they can think just as logically as you. They don't know as much and they're not as wise. They haven't had as many experiences. That's the reason they want to challenge you. As a parent, again, you got to use that relationship that you have with them as a basis for getting in the weeds and talking through some of these issues with them. They're going to want to kick it around. If you don't have that relationship, then you're not going to be able to have those conversations and try to add that kind of perspective to their lives.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, our self-esteem simply means our inner sense of worth or value. Our self-concept then would be what we have formed to believe as true or untrue about ourself. We're not talking about being proud or an overblown view of self. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about just a reasonable... Like Paul said, think soberly about yourself. You know that?

Dr. Gary Sibcy: It's interesting that Paul talks about thinking soberly about yourself as being key to self-esteem. And interestingly, now in the DSM-5, that's our manual in psychiatry about personality and about mental disorders, but what it does is define normally that a sense of self is an accurate sense of self that's not too low, but also not too high. But it's also really important as you think of self-esteem as something that's stable. I sometimes talk to my clients about, "Are you a self-esteem reptile or are you a self-esteem mammal?"

And they're like, "What? What are you talking about?" I say, "Well, you see, mammals can regulate their body temperature, right? If the temperature changes outside, their body temperature stays the same for the most part. Whereas a reptile, if the temperature changes outside, their body temperature changes with it." Well, with self-esteem the question is, if you're a self-esteem reptile, it means you only feel as good as what's going on in your environment, right? If you get a poor grade, then you totally stink.

If you get a great grade, you feel great about yourself. If your friends are nice to you today, I guess you're a lovable, worthwhile, popular person. But if not, then I guess you really stink. See, that's a self-esteem reptile. Whereas a self-esteem mammal is a person whose self-esteem is relatively stable that can kind of endure sort of normal changes in the landscape. Some days you win. Some days you lose. Sometimes you do really well. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes your friends want to hang out. Sometimes maybe not.

You got to be able to recover from these things. The question is, how do they develop that capacity? They're not just born with it. It'd be nice potentially if it was. You think, well, "What's the role of me as a parent in helping my child develop more stable self-esteem?" And again, comes through these conversations.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's everything. It really is everything. Here's what we know, kids with low self-esteem struggle with academic performance. They're often underachievers. They can even go into self-hate. They struggle with getting close with others. In other words, they have probably problems with friendships. They lack confidence. They struggle with anxiety and depression. They have an increased vulnerability to substance abuse. Do I need to say more? Kids who have a we'll call it a balanced sense of self are more friendly, have a lot more energy.

Hey, I like this, they smile more. They talk more positively about themselves, and they tend to be more independent. That's what we're trying to get them to be. You're listening to Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton. Our special in studio guest is Dr. Gary Sibcy, clinical psychologist, head of the clinical psychology programs at Liberty University. He's also involved in private practice at Piedmont Psychiatric Care.

Works with families every day. Big, big topic talking about self-esteem, especially in this day, this hour with the insanity going on in the world around us and how stress and anxiety and so many pieces fit into this. Gary, a lot of kids struggle with self-esteem and it affects their trajectory. A lot of mental health disorders are formed in the early phase of life. By, what, age 14, 60% of mental health disorders are already set in place.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Well, and self-esteem serves as a background factor, right? Your child may not have developed an anxiety disorder or depression or some other type of problem. But if self-esteem is low and you get the right combination of stressors, then they're likely to start developing some of these problems. We want to really help parents work on some of the things that help build your child's self-esteem.

Building a child's self-esteem isn't just about you walking around and telling them, "Oh, that's great. That's awesome. You're amazing," or making sure that they get a trophy after every sporting event that they get involved with. That won't get you there. It's going to involve some other things, which we're going to talk about later.

Dr. Tim Clinton: This got my attention, Gary, 75% of girls with low self-esteem admitted to engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as cutting, bullying other girls, drinking, smoking, eating disorders. Seven out of 10 girls believed that they were not good enough or did not measure up whether in looks, relationships, or academic performance. I mean, when you see those, that's so sobering. Gary, let's talk about some of the top stressors for kids that impact their everyday life and I think their self-esteem.

Parents having problems, fights with friends or siblings, excessive performance demands, in other words, their tests, homework, grades, how they look, not having privacy, moving, teachers who don't like them, not having any money. Start seeing how these things begin to impact kids?

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Oh yeah. I mean, on so many different levels. We always tell parents, "You got to take care of yourself, and you got to take care of your relationships. Your kids are watching." If your marriage isn't doing well, your child's watching this and they actually spend a lot of time actually blaming themselves for what's going on with you. Take that into account. It doesn't mean just feel badly about it, but make sure you seek help yourself if you need that. If your marriage is in trouble, seek help for that, right?

Because if you don't, kids don't look at it and necessarily go, "Oh well, mom and dad are having problems. I think I'll go do my own thing." They tend to think it's about them, right? This is a very important point that when things go wrong for you or go wrong in your marriage, literally kids are going to blame themselves about that, and that starts to take an impact on their self-esteem, right?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, what I worry about is our kids getting lost, bullying. Gary, the conversation around masks that have been going on this fall, people are worry that taking away that kind of capacity to connect. We already gone through the lockdowns and so much brokenness in our families and this craziness from the pandemic and everything. But now kids going back to school and I know it's important to protect and to be safe and all that. Do you see there's some real potential implications here?

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Everybody's had this experience up to this point. It's just being able to read other people's facial expressions and knowing... If you are just looking at somebody's eyes, well, that's important, but looking at the rest of their face and being able to make these inferences about how they feel, really tough to do. For certain kids who already struggle with this ability to read and understand other people's emotions, this sort of intensifies their anxiety. I wanted to mention another really important stressor to kids.

At the very top of the stress scale is the death of a spouse or death of a parent if you're a child. You know what number two is on that scale? A move. We're talking about a move from one school district to another school district or from one state to another state. That's number two on the stress list of all the different stressors out there. That's what's hard is sometimes we think stress is about how painful something is. It's not always about how painful it is. It's about how much adjustment do you need to adapt to this.

People sometimes take for granted that you can just pull up from a community and go plop yourself down in another community and find a church, find friends, find small groups, find schools, find friends at schools, and just sort of be completely welcomed with open arms. It doesn't work that easily. People have this tremendously difficult time with that adjustment period.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You often talk, Gary, and I love this, you talk about horizontal stressors. We're all going to experience stress in life, but then there are these vertical stressors that get dropped on us that come in like bombs. If you get too many of these things going off in your life that are coming out of nowhere, that are getting just

boom, that stuff it throws you sideways because you're "waiting for the proverbial next shoe to drop."

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Yeah, we talk about those horizontal stressors, which are the sort of normal transitions in our life. And just keep that in mind. Transitions are great, but they're also stressful and they require your self-esteem to be in place in order to absorb it, right? When your kid finally leaves preschool and goes to regular school, to elementary school, and then to a middle school, then to high schools, then to college, each one of these transitions is positive, but also stressful because they require that your identity become increasingly consolidated.

But a vertical stressor too is if as a parent, right, some stuff... Say for example things went really badly for you as a nine-year-old. Your mom got sick and was in the hospital and eventually died. Now you're a parent. You're raising your kids and they get to be eight, nine, and 10. Your brain is still going to remember what happened to you when you were nine years old, and that's going to start to influence the way you feel and react to your kids in the present moment. Interestingly, our brain doesn't forget these things.

The vertical stressor is how it follows you from your past and unfolds in the current developmental platform that you're on with your kids right now. You sometimes as a parent have to sit back and think back to what it was like for you at this time when you were growing up and ask yourself, "Is that influencing the way I'm feeling and reacting to my kids right now?"

Dr. Tim Clinton: So much to talk about. What are some of the signs and symptoms of a child that's in a spin? A conversation around what are we going to do? What can I do in my family to help strengthen this? What do I do as a parent if I'm really super worried about my child? Interesting, Gary. Let's close out with this thought. George Barna says this. Research now shows that what we believe by age 13, and I'll say about who we are, how we fit in, about this world, what we see going on around us, is likely what we will die believing.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: The continuity of those beliefs is very strong.

Dr. Tim Clinton: We've got to get this right. And as parents, we've got a beautiful opportunity to impact the trajectory of our kids, how they're going to view God and life and themselves in the midst of all of it and develop self-efficacy, ways of having success on the road forward. Gary, delightful conversation. I can't wait to get into more of this tomorrow. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Gary Sibcy: Thank you, Tim.

Roger Marsh: God designed the family as the base of the support system for kids as they grow and mature. A child's early formative years are so important in building and shaping their self-worth. Those years really do set kids up for success or struggle as they reach the adult years. Now, if you're feeling a bit nervous and wondering

if maybe you're up for the task of helping your child deal with their self-esteem, first, remember you are not alone. God made you the parent of your child for a reason, and God doesn't make mistakes.

Be in constant prayer for your kids and ask God to guide you as you raise them up. Secondly, here at Family Talk, we are here to help. Just visit our website at drjamesdobson.org. You'll find a host of great resources that can help you as you navigate the child rearing years. Again, that web address is drjamesdobson.org, or you can always give us a call at (877)-732-6825. Now, Dr. Clinton and Dr. Sibcy have a lot more to discuss about raising happy, healthy children.

Make sure you join us again tomorrow to hear the conclusion of that conversation. For everyone here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, I'm Roger Marsh, wishing you God's richest blessings for you and your family.

Announcer:

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