

'Unconditional regard' buoys kids' self-esteem

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Study finds children who know friends will always care are more resilient.

(HealthDay)—Kids who believe their friends like them, no matter what, may be less prone to feeling bad about themselves when things go wrong, a new study hints.

Researchers found that when they had public school students think about times when their friends showed them "unconditional regard," it seemed to buffer them against low self-esteem when they got a bad report card.

"The findings are consistent with classic psychological theory," said Eddie Brummelman, a postdoctoral researcher now at the University of Amsterdam who led the study while at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

It's been thought that unconditional regard "imbues children with the feeling of being valuable for who they are, even when they perform

poorly," Brummelman explained.

In the new study, reported online on Nov. 3 in *Pediatrics*, Brummelman's team put that theory to the test.

The researchers developed an exercise that asked kids to think about friends who "accept and value" them, no matter what, and then write about a situation where a friend showed them such unconditional regard.

Then the researchers randomly assigned nearly 250 students—11 to 15 years old—to either complete that exercise or be in one of two comparison groups. In one, students wrote about instances where their peers looked down on them for making a mistake or doing something "stupid." In the other, kids wrote about interactions with classmates who did not know them well.

Three weeks later, the students received their report cards. And overall, the study found, kids with low grades were less likely to feel bad about themselves if they'd written about unconditional regard a few weeks earlier.

While the study found a link between unconditional regard and fewer negative self-feelings later on, it did not prove cause and effect.

The findings were not surprising to Sara Rivero-Conil, a child psychologist at Miami Children's Hospital who reviewed the study.

"This is something we do in therapy with children with mental health disorders," Rivero-Conil said. "If a child feels like they're not loved—even if that's not true, it's the perception that matters. So we want to help bring out what they're not seeing."

But, as this study highlights, children without [mental health disorders](#)

may also benefit from remembering they are valued—even when they don't get an "A" or win the soccer game, Rivero-Conil said.

Brummelman's team focused on students' feelings about their friends, so it's not clear whether reflecting on unconditional love from parents would have the same effect. In fact, Brummelman said, "surprisingly little is known to date about how parents' unconditional regard affects children's self-feelings."

His research has shown, however, that when parents lavish praise on their kids, it can backfire. Brummelman said that if, for example, children are told "you are great" when they do something well, they can interpret that as, "They think I'm great only if I do well."

So, he said, it's a better idea to note your child's effort—as in, "You did a great job."

According to Rivero-Conil, it's important for parents to teach their [children](#), from early on, that setbacks are part of life—and do not change anyone's value as a person. Feeling bad about a poor grade or a lost soccer match is OK, she noted, but kids need to be able to keep some perspective.

"We want them to be able to step back [from the experience] and see that they're still worthy and valuable," Rivero-Conil said. "They need to know you love them, not matter what."

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has more on [healthy self-esteem](#).

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