



**Does sport help build  
self-esteem? ▶**

Renowned child psychologist Jean Piaget believed that the most important phase in the development of self-esteem occurs between the ages of about six and 11. This is also a time when children are most likely to be introduced to sport. How children come to understand themselves and relate to others in social situations, such as sport, is essential in helping them develop mature social skills.

Research conducted in British Columbia with more than 650 parents found that the primary reason they register their youngsters in youth sport is to build self-esteem. And they're right. Success in sport will, in fact, help children build healthier self-esteem.

Very early in life, children begin to develop a picture of themselves, a self-image. They develop positive feelings about themselves and acquire a sense of importance and self-worth. The way in which they see and evaluate themselves — either positively or negatively — is known as self-esteem.

If children are given many opportunities to succeed in sport, they will more often come to see themselves as 'winners' rather than 'losers'. They will grow up to be better adjusted, more confident, and better able to cope with stress and new challenges.

A child's self-esteem is initially shaped by parents. Verbal and non-verbal reactions, praise and criticism, smiles, other facial expressions, and hugs help to influence a child's level of independence and sense of achievement. When children are given lots of praise and positive reinforcement, they develop high self-esteem.

Behavioural psychologist B.F. Skinner believes that personalities are shaped by the *positive* reinforcement received throughout a lifetime. According to Skinner, we are what we have been *rewarded* for being.

Sport provides children with opportunities to try new skills and assess their capabilities. As figures of authority, parents and coaches have an enormous capacity to make children feel good about themselves. Even casual remarks can have a great impact. Parents and coaches should always find something each child does well, even if it's just following directions, and give praise for that.