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Self-Esteem Lie

by Laura Caler*

We tell kids all the time that “there are no dumb questions.” Okay, I’m here to do something shocking. I’m going to tell the truth. A lot of people may not like this, but I don’t care because it needs to be said:

There ARE dumb questions. Yes kids. Sometimes, you ask really dumb questions. And it hurts me physically when you do this.

Where did we go wrong in society that we are so concerned about self-esteem that we ignore the truth? We tell kids LIES to make them feel better. How is this helping them?

“That’s okay Ashley, your answer wasn’t exactly right. But you were close. Good job.”

Okay, Ashley, I’m going to lay it out all honest like for ya: YOU WERE WRONG. As a matter of fact, you weren’t even close. Yes, I appreciate you trying, but you were still wrong, and still not even close.

“Ms. C, do I have to do this assignment like everyone else since I have a basketball game tonight? I’m going to go pro someday, so I have to play in this game. I won’t have time to do your assignment.”

Liar Me: “No, you don’t. You try hard every day, and we all know sports are more important than your school work. You take all the time you need. And I can tell you will be a pro basketball player some day. You are WONDERFUL!”

Real Me: “Yes. You do. I realize you have a game, but I don’t care about that. What I care about is you getting in your assignment so that you can LEARN something, just in case your plan of going pro doesn’t pan out. Because I’ve seen you play. And you need to study.”

Okay, so maybe Real Me doesn’t actually say all that. More of a combination of the two, because there is no call to be mean.

But when my daughter breaks something of mine, I don't say, "Oh honey, that's okay. Look at all the wonderful new shapes and colors you've created by dropping Mommy's very expensive bottle of perfume on my new carpet. Aren't YOU the creative one?!"

Nope. It goes more along the lines of this: "Don't touch my stuff. It's mine. Not yours. You're grounded."

When did we become so concerned about children's self-esteem that we LIE to them? How are we helping a child by constantly telling him how wonderful he is? Because let's face it, the real world will not think he's wonderful when he screws up. His boss is NOT going to pat him on the back and give him chance, after chance, after chance because he's such a "good kid." If he screws up, he will get fired. Because your boss doesn't CARE about your self-esteem.

I once had a student ask me if something she wrote was good. I assumed she wanted my honest opinion, so I told her where it was lacking and how she could improve. She said, "Wow. That hurts my self-esteem."

I said, "Your self-esteem is not my problem. My concern is to make sure you have everything you need to graduate and succeed. Your self-esteem will grow the more you succeed. I won't lie to you just to make you feel better. You know you're a good person. You don't need me to baby you."

She said, "You're right. That makes sense."

And she didn't run off crying about how I destroyed her self-esteem. Because I didn't. But I was honest.

Now, I'm not saying we should tell kids they are horrible, or lazy, or rotten. Unless they are. Then yeah, it's society's job to make sure that they have are given the opportunity to CORRECT these things. If a child is a mean bully, and the kids at school hate him, don't LIE to him and tell him he's wonderful. Tell him he is mean, and this is why kids don't want to play with him. Then show him ways to correct his behavior and make friends.

My oldest daughter is very, very bossy. I have NO idea where she gets this. And when she plays with her little friends, they tend to get upset, and want to go home early. Instead of coddling her, and telling her she's a nice girl, and there is something wrong with the other girls, I tell her that she shouldn't be so bossy. I explain that no one likes to play with bossy people, and that if she truly wants to keep her friends, she should tone it down. I let her know that she's being mean when she is so bossy.

We are not doing kids these days any favors by lying to them about their character. We are so concerned that kids will grow up having poor self-esteem, that even when they're bad, we tell them they are good. This is RIDICULOUS to me.

"Oh, I know that man raped and killed 15 women, but I'm sure he's got a good heart." It's ridiculous on this level. Yes it is.

Call it like it is. Make children take responsibility for themselves or their actions. If a child is a liar, she shouldn't be told she's a "creative story teller." She's a liar.

If a child is a thief, he is not "resourceful." Stealing is NOT just another word for sharing.

Oh, I know. I've probably hurt some of your feelings. Well good. We need to stop indulging the people of our society and start making them responsible individuals. When I screwed up, my parents called me on it. When I lied to them, they told me good people don't lie. When I stole from them, they told me good people don't steal. They taught me how to take responsibility for my own actions. They were not very concerned for my self-esteem. They were concerned about the adult I would become. And this meant teaching me painful lessons about myself. Lessons children MUST go through to become good people.

This does not mean we don't love our children. In fact, it means we DO love them. Because it shows we want what's best for them. Lying to our children is not what's best for them. Teaching them to be responsible people will only lead to their success. And this is what will contribute to their self-esteem. Because their self-esteem is their responsibility. Not society's.

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