Making the Grade: Part 2  
Helpful Hints Series #3  
from Dr. Barry Ziff

As special educators we have a unique relationship with our students. Many of our students are with us for several years; allowing time to build a significant bond that helps establish a special rapport with our children and their parents.

This unique bond allows us to not only provide an appropriate academic learning environment, but allows us to build important social skills and positive self-worth with our students. If learning is to be a vital process in a child’s life, then the development of self-awareness is essential. As significant adults in the lives of our students we play an important role in helping them develop a positive self-concept. As teachers, a major part of our job is to help students not only grow academically, but socially and emotionally as well. Research and our own experience with young people have demonstrated clearly that self-confidence is learned. It is not an inherited characteristic.

From our earliest moments of life we begin to accumulate information about our world and ourselves. These early experiences play a significant role in forming the kind of person we eventually become as adults. All new experiences are interpreted in light of all the beliefs and attitudes we have accumulated within our perception of “self” through various interactions with others. By the time a child reaches school age his/her self-concept is well formed. It is not only the parent’s responsibility but teachers as well to help each child develop positive attitudes about school, making friends and developing into a successful and happy individual.

To live and learn is the natural order for most children. However, all children develop differently, according to their own time clock and ability. It must be emphasized that the best preparation for adulthood is to consistently experience a satisfying childhood in which the child learns to function independently as possible and acquires confidence in his/her own abilities.

The role of the teacher is to maximize the possibilities for successful learning to take place by providing a responsive learning environment that encourages positive growth. This is the reason why it is important to provide an evaluative grade that reflects a child’s efforts as well as evaluating the final end result or product. In this type of school setting children learn to respect and accept the values of others and have the opportunity to develop self-respect and positive self-esteem. Developing an “I can do it” attitude is an important first step to becoming a competent adult. Eliminating negative phrases from a child’s vocabulary is another important step in building self-confidence. Destructive and negative phrases such as, “I can’t,” “I should,” “I don’t care,” “There is nothing to do,” and “”Do I have to?” lead to failure and an inappropriate attitude for meaningful learning to take place.

Developing a sense of empowerment and personal responsibility is a key factor to building a successful and happy future. Many of our children become victimized and blame others for their failures. It is important for teachers to recognize this negative behavior in children and provide opportunities that encourage success. Teachers can do this by helping student realize they have control in their lives; and
that making good decisions will lead to positive results. Helping children understand and cope with frustration and anger is important in this process. They will begin to understand that a simple solution to their problem is learning to make the correct choices. Understanding the consequences of different choices provides students with a framework for making decisions. Given a variety of opportunities children learn to make choices that lead to positive results. A teacher’s role in this process is to point out alternatives, provide incentives and be consistent with consequences. This concept is simple in design, however, in the real world of the classroom, this process takes time and patience to cause an affective change in behavior.

As teachers, we can help build responsibility in our students by encouraging and supporting the positive decisions students make each day. Teachers can differentiate the instruction, provide one-on-one assistance and instill confidence by providing immediate feedback regarding the choices students make. Obviously, less mature or younger children will need more support and guidance than older or more mature students in learning to take responsibility for themselves. Realize that each child is uniquely different and be prepared to encourage, prod and nurture as needed on a daily basis.

This is not an easy job! However, by providing consistent encouragement and support you can, over time, make a significant contribution to the well being of a child.