

Me, Me, Me: When Kids Think Only of Themselves

“When we are happy, we are less self-focused. We like others more, and we want to share our good fortune, even with strangers.”—Martin Seligman, American researcher

Kids are self-absorbed. It’s part of their development. At times, they need to focus on themselves to grow up well. Yet, as parents, we can continue to help them be aware of, be sensitive to, and help the people around them. This is easier to do at certain ages than others, but all kids benefit when they develop a healthy sense of themselves while also developing a healthy sense of caring for others.

Try it...

For all parents

- Remember that you are not alone. Almost all parents complain about their kids being self-absorbed. This occurs most intensely when kids are young (during the toddler and preschool years) and then again in the early teenage years.
- Support your kids. Encourage your kids. Be proud of your kids. Help them grow up well as individuals, but also nurture their caring for others. As a family, do simple family service projects. Bake cookies for a sick friend. Help an elderly person with yard work or errands. For family service ideas, see the free MVParents newsletter, [Family Volunteering](#).
- Set age-appropriate boundaries for your kids. Kids who grow up self-absorbed have been handed everything and not expected to follow boundaries.
- Notice and acknowledge your child’s positive behavior whenever you see him acting in caring ways toward other people and animals.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Teach children to share from an early age, even though sharing is a difficult concept for young children to learn. Keep teaching them about sharing, and they will gradually learn it.
- Keep a healthy balance of your child having her own things and also sharing. For example, if you invite a child over to play at your home, ask your child to put away her favorite toys that she doesn’t want to share. Explain how everything else is meant to be shared while the child visits.
- Meet your child’s needs. If your child cries, attend to him immediately. Keep your child fed, rested, and stimulated. The better your child is cared for as a young child, the more likely he will develop a strong sense of self and become a caring individual.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Kids can become selfish when they feel threatened or scared. Instead of coming down hard on your kids when they act this way, ask questions to see if something else might be going on.
- Continue to value, listen, and respect your child. Nurture her identity. You cannot become a caring individual if you don't feel cared for.
- Keep in touch with grandparents, neighbors, and extended family members. When you bring your kids with you to be with other people, they see you caring for others, and they learn to be interested in others.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Don't be surprised if your former caring child becomes a self-absorbed teenager. This often happens, and it happens to a lot of kids. Give your child some space to develop, but continue to emphasize how important it is to help and care for others.
- Kids at this age often love to help others through projects. Have the budding artists create cards to send to homebound or sick people. Have those who enjoy cooking bake something for a widow. Also see if a local congregation has service projects that your kids can do with their friends.
- Be sensitive toward your self-conscious, self-absorbed teenager. Many have fragile identities. Even though they may push you away, they still want your support and care.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Because of the sometimes fierce competition in high school, some older teenagers can become wrapped up in their own worlds in order to succeed. Monitor their stress and competition levels. Encourage them to have a healthy social life in addition to having a healthy academic life.
- Older teenagers often take great pride in doing more extensive, challenging service projects. Some go to weeklong service camps in other states—or other countries. Or see if your teen would be interested in building houses with Habitat for Humanity. Visit their Web site to find a local chapter.
- Continue to do your part in modeling caring. Volunteer at your teen's school—or in an organization or your community. Talk about why you volunteer and why you enjoy it. Even if your teenager doesn't do much volunteering now, he will remember what you did.