Transcript: "I Like Me!": Developing Self-Esteem in the Early Years Featuring Jeree Pawl, Ph.D.

Q:

Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE 's exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I'm Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted also with support from MetLife Foundation.

I am delighted to welcome Dr. Jeree Pawl who's joining us today to talk about how young children develop self esteem. Jeree is a clinical psychologist who has worked with infants, toddlers and their families for 40 years. She is also on the Board of Directors at ZERO TO THREE. Jeree, so lets start off by just trying to define self esteem in young children and help me to paint a picture of what a very young child with good self esteem looks like.

A: The foundation of self esteem begins from the time a baby enters the world. We have the very good fortune of the fact that they're constructed in such a way that we could describe it as they're being born looking for us. We are the most fascinating things in the world, and we certainly have been waiting for them and imaging them. And now we're going to find out who they are. We're amazed, and we're awed, and, we will begin to get to know each other. And it's in that context of the beaming, the loving, the paying attention, the turn-take, that they begin to feel competent, good about themselves, and begin to make a most miraculous adaptations to people from the beginning.

Q: Yeah. I mean, there's no question that you do see even from the earliest moments, that the way a baby attends to his mom's face or his dad's face is—is kind of miraculous. And I'm sure—there's probably been a lot of research in terms of how we're wired for that. But if for some reason, that isn't happening—you know, I think there's been a lot of talk about, umm, this—this idea of bonding, and for some mothers it doesn't happen instantaneously. They may have that instant, "Oh, my gosh," falling madly in love with their babies, but sometimes they don't. Is it—is that a problem? Or is that something that, you know, can take some time, and mothers really shouldn't beat themselves up for that?

A: I guess I would put it this way: babies are very forgiving. They really are very forgiving. And they will take what they can get. And in—in one way you can think of them as—as leading you, because that's really what you should be letting them do is letting you know who they are, and you're trying to figure that out with them. And as long as you're trying to adjust to them, I think that a period of adjustment is a perfectly normal thing.

Q: Great. Let's talk a little bit about, you know, when you see a baby, umm, interacting with a parent, and, uh, you—you described—at one point we were talking about this—Jeree, this wonderful thing where they wiggle around and they're—you know, you go and you smile at the baby, and the baby wiggles around, and—and seems to be saying, "Gosh, I am just a terrific person," and that that's something that, again, you do see from a very young age.

A: Absolutely. They seem to be basking in splashes of sunshine, is the way I think about it. They're just undone by being so treasured. You have a back-and-forth conversation, and there's no way of missing the, umm, affection and love and, uh, admiration really one for the other that people are experiencing.

Q: Right. And—and I think that—one of the things you said that's so important is that doesn't mean that you have to be a happy mommy or a happy daddy every minute; of course, they love it when you're smiling at them, but they also can tolerate it when you're not in such a great mood, but you're—you know, you're addressing their needs. That certainly responding to them doesn't necessarily mean you have to be responding in the most upbeat way all the time.

A: Not at all. And they aren't always the happiest babies we've ever seen either. And we are forgiving of them. And it's just kind of finding out, uh, what cues they're giving; and I was thinking about, uh, learning babies' different cries, and what they mean, and how to respond. And then how good they are so quickly picking up our cues. And when thinking about baby who's being breast fed and it's nighttime and they wake up, and when you pick them up and get them settled. Within weeks they will respond not only to hearing your voice, but also, uh, they would respond to the click of the light switch in the hall. They begin to know that you're coming, and they begin to calm themselves, which, by the way, is another source of their self esteem is being able to deal with their own feelings, to regulate themselves, any of the things you can do that sort of are self-soothing are very important sources of feeling like you're a competent person.

Q: Yeah. You know, I was just, umm, talking about this with my niece, because she has a new baby, and they were going through the torment of, you know, not—not sleeping for more than two hours at a stretch. And she was definitely at an age where she could, umm, be taught to self soothe, and—and sleep for longer periods of time. But it's never easy.

She has now gotten out the other side of this, and their baby's sleeping, you know, eight hours, and everybody's feeling better. And I said, "So, how do you feel," and she said, "Well, I realize she really was ready for this, and I needed to let her do it." And I thought, well, that's such a great way of thinking about it, and a wonderful way of thinking about so many things with our kids as they grow, that, umm, you know, not swooping in to save them, umm, you know, not necessarily making sure that they're happy every minute is—is very, very important as you're saying to their development of self esteem.

A: Yeah, it is important to their self esteem. There are now things you can do. You can entertain yourself, you can sing to yourself, you can do all kinds of things so that you don't actually, uh, in that moment need that other person, but you will find your way through it. And that's really another source of feeling like a good and competent person.

Q: So, one of the things, umm, I think that a lot of parents are confused about is the idea of telling a child how great they are. In other words, how do you, umm, advise parents when it comes to, you know, how much praise do children need?

A: The thing that's most important for them to not do is skip over the ways in which a child comes to feel proud of himself as if there were this empty bottle sitting somewhere in the child's tummy that had to be filled with self esteem, and if you didn't pour in enough it would leak out somewhere and they'd never have any. It's not like that.

Letting themselves be the source of their own mastery, hence their self esteem, is a very important thing to get in your head so that you don't feel like you're responsible for continuously pouring into this empty vessel, or one that might be leaking over and over and over, praising, carrying on as if they don't have the capacity to feel proud on their own of themselves, which they do.

Q: Yeah. No. I mean, this is—this is reminding me of a moment when my daughter was about—I guess eight months old, nine months old, and she was at that stage of crawling, and she'd often get under a table, or under a piece of furniture and then sit up, and then not be able to figure out how to

get back out again. So, she had done this. And I was with a woman who was actually—umm, I think she was from Vienna. She was a psychologist. She was a wonderful woman. And Mattie did this. She crawled under the chair, sat up, and then started to panic, because she couldn't figure out how to get back out. And she looked like she was in a little jail, because of the bars of the chair. So, I of course am starting to go over to lift the chair off, and this woman said, "Oh, no-no, don't do that." She said, "No-no. She can do it." She said, "You just tell her how to do it." And I'm thinking, well, this—you know, maybe this is how you do it in Vienna, but I think this was kind of—and I got down and I looked at Mattie, and I said, "You can do it, honey. Just put your head down." So—you know, and she looked like a little Buddha. I'll never forget. And she bent down, and she crawled out. And I have to say that the look on her face was, you know, this unbelievably triumphant smile of, "I did it." And it was a really important lesson for me. Mattie was my first, and so I was constantly I think swooping in to make sure she didn't get frustrated or upset or scared. But, needless to say, this—she wanted—she crawled under the chair and sat up about sixteen more times.

A: There couldn't be anything more exciting in a child's life than the mastery of their own body or the physical world—what you do with a block, uh, how you roll a ball—all of those things, which you take so much for granted, don't get counted somehow I think in people's thinking about how do I build my child's self esteem. Well, they build their own, for one thing. And our job is to understand them, and to love them, and to make sure that you give them the opportunity to do that.

Q: Uh, you know, this is a great opportunity I think for us to talk a little bit about limit setting in this context, Jeree. In other words, uh, again, this is something that a lot of parents struggle with. They don't want to make their children unhappy. They don't want to frustrate them. But I'm sure you would agree that limit setting in a loving way is linked to this idea of helping them develop mastery. Can you talk a little bit about that?

A: Yeah. I think passing through the world without encountering sorrow, sadness, frustration, misery, and a number of other things that we could mention that seem terribly unpleasant is not going to happen to anybody. So, comforting a child and helping them through that, and supporting them while they'll find their own ways through I think are terribly important, because you're learning to deal with something, and in a sense it's, again, part of becoming competent, that you really can deal with disappointment and all those kinds of things. I mean, self esteem itself is not as if it were something that got built and nothing ever assaulted it or changed it.

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: But in any case, umm, you really do want to do that. Two things I think about in—uh, when you have to disappoint a child—is another way of thinking about it—is to recognize the legitimacy of what they want, and to let them know that you know that, and that you know they're disappointed, but we're gonna do it anyway.

Q: So, you know, what you're saying is that there's a big difference between not enabling a child to explore, and enabling a child to explore, but setting limits within that environment.

A: Yes.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about temperament in the—in the sense of, you know, for some kids it must be harder for them to do everything from tune in to people, to tolerate frustration, to manage their emotions and their impulses, and so maybe they have, you know, experienced a lot more nos, and it's harder to be a loving, patient parent with the certain kinds of children. Let—let's talk a little bit about that. What are some of them, umm, issues if you have a—you know, what we might call a challenging child?

A: Umm, well, I guess I would—I would start a little bit before that, which would be to acknowledge who you really have, and to respect that. We have a tendency to think that as much as we adore this child, if only they were a little more this way or a little more that way—we have our own ideas often about exactly who the perfect child would be, and superimpose that on our own child sometimes. So, it's actually acknowledging the reality of the difficulty a child has, and not somehow thinking that the child should be different.

Q: This is so important. I'm so glad you brought this up. I mean, I—I think that, as—as you're saying, that the—we all do have expectations. We have an image of what we want our children to be from a very, very young age. I think labeling children happens, you know, in utero, even if it's an affectionate label, it's a—it's a limit, and it says a lot about what we, uh, want that child to be or don't want that child to be.

A: I was thinking about two little girls that I witnessed—they're the same age. They're maybe eighteen, twenty months. And it was an Easter, and the—there was a basket waiting in the living room for each of them, and they were sent on their way to get them. And one of the little girl stopped dead still, looked across the room and studied what that was that was over there, then walked very slowly toward it, looked down on it, sat down and began picking up the items in it one by one and examining it. And the

other little girl ran so fast across the room that she ran into it and spilled everything that was in the basket all over the floor. Now, a piece of advice for the parent of either one of those child would be rather different. And acknowledging that you're not going to get this quiet one, if that's what you might have preferred, and you're not going to get this lively one, if that's what you preferred, is extremely important.

Q: Yes. And—and, again, linked to this, as you have—self esteem, because if—you know, the child who seems to fall short of mom or dad's expectations, or a caregiver's expectations, is getting the message that they're just…

A: They're not good enough.

Q: They're not good enough, or they're too impulsive.

A: They're not right.

Q: Or, "Look what you did." I mean, in a—in a situation like that where you have the child who tends to be the one who barrels into the room and knocks over whatever it is she was going after, what are some of the things you—you say to parents who are dealing with a child who let's say is high energy—maybe they're low energy, as parents, and that that fit is a—is a bit of a challenge?

A: It's also trying to get people to try to experience something like how do they imagine it is to be that child. What does it feel like? What does he experience? And it can be very helpful to a parent to if you've really observed them to say, "You know, when you do this, I think this is what it feels like to him," or to her, and get them to move over there just enough so that their attitude shifts enough so they can be more flexible and more thoughtful about how they respond.

Q: Often a difficult trap to avoid as parents of, umm, projecting what, you know, you may either want the child to be feeling, or you may be feeling, umm, and this is—uh, it seems to me a—a sort of flipside of the same coin of not respecting who that child is.

A: The child plays quietly in the sandbox by herself, and you think, "My God, she must be lonely."

Q: Right. Exactly. Or must have low self esteem. Yes that's a great example. Let's talk about that. I have a friend who I've known literally since birth, and, you know, she was an unbelievably gregarious kid on—still is, and has dozens of friends. And, umm, her little boy was just not this kind of a kid. He's much more like his dad. And he—umm, I

remember her calling me at one point. She said, “You know, he only has one friend, and I’m really worried about. I think he just has such low self esteem. I don’t know what to do about it.” And, what would you have said to—to—what would you have said to her?

A: I suppose I would first say, “What worries you about it?” Then you—you know, you talk about, “Does it seem to worry this child? What makes you think this child feels badly?” Does this child seem to feel pretty good about herself, is she happy? you see what I mean?

Q: Yes. Yes. What I’m hearing you say, Jeree, is it is both about really standing in his little shoes, but also, you know, standing outside of those shoes and letting him be who he is, that you—that you can’t control who your child is.

A: That’s right.

Q: So, Jeree, we’ve talked a lot about, umm, children’s temperament. I mean, sometimes— we’ve all been there. There are moments when maybe you have an otherwise lovely child, but they just lose it, and you do certainly see parents who just say, “You know, cut it out,” or, you know, “What’s the matter with you?” or things that are actually I think somewhat humiliating and shaming to a child. And I’m assuming you would say that’s probably not the best way to react when a child is out of control or doing something that may even be embarrassing to you if this is in a public place.

A: One of the things that occurs to me here is that we use empathy a lot to understand others, and sometimes our empathy fails us, because we simply can’t get inside that little person to understand exactly why they’re behaving this way. And that’s when I think we feel impotent and angry, and are likely to be insulting to them, unsupportive to them, and make them feel ashamed and as if they’re really wretched—wretched, rotten people.

Q: Right. Actually I think that’s so important. And I think that if you are a parent of a child who is very sensitive, or is prone to, you know, a lot of, umm, meltdowns, or who has such a hard time with transitions that you—you know, you just get to the point where you know that to move from one activity to the other is gonna cause a big battle. It must—you know, there—there are times when you do sometimes, as you say, need that outside help. I mean, we’ve all been there.

A: One of the things that I’m thinking of here that we haven’t mentioned in this regard is there are particularly toddlers that really need to work it out themselves, that is the more we intervene, the more we try to persuade,

the more we try to understand, the worse it is. And that a child like that will often run into their room and stay there and come out transformed. And—and that's another possibility, that they really are a child whose insides are in such turmoil that input from us does not help. It only agitates the already disorganized little system that they have there. And I've seen it, uh, in one of my grandchildren. We suddenly realized that if we didn't try to be so perfect and wonderful to her, that she hated, uh, if we let her alone--to just go off from here and bury your head and work it out, she did much better.

Q: You know, again, this gets back to following your child's lead in—you know, especially as they—as they grow and you get to see a little bit more of how complex, but also how very consistent their personalities are, is really in many ways one of the gifts of parenthood . I'm thinking of this, umm, wonderful story in, Peter Neubauer's book about identical twin studies, and that these are twins who were separated at birth and adopted in different families. And they came to one mother and did a big interview about what the child was like, and when they talked about her eating habits, umm, the mother was so frustrated. She said, "Oh, she's just impossible. She will not eat anything. I tried noodles, I tried rice, I've tried everything, and, you know, she won't eat anything unless I put cinnamon on it." And then they found the other mother, and the mother said, "Oh, she's fantastic." And they said, "Really?" You know, "No problems?" "No-no. Absolutely—she'll eat anything. Of course I have to put cinnamon on it."

A: Well, I think the thing is that the more different they are from us as people and what we imagine they should like the more we're interested in how that is because it's so puzzling and surprising to us.

Q: To actually try to understand that as opposed to try to change it.

A: Yeah. When we're in a good mood we can think of it as interesting.

Q: I think that the things you've said today, Jeree, about the development of self esteem from the early age, and, umm, you know, making them feel great, and, at the same time, helping them really learn to muscle through problems to get that sense of mastery is—umm, been really wonderful. So, I want to thank you so much.

.A: It's a wonderful adventure for the most part.

Q: Yes. That it is. It never ends either.

A: It never ends either. No, it doesn't.

Q: Great. Thanks so much.

A: Well, thank you very much too.

Q: Okay. Bye.

A: Bye-bye.