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## They Like Themselves

Wednesday, November 19, 2008

*USA Today* is out with a report on a new research project that deserves our attention. It seems that high school graduates surveyed in 2006 consider themselves much more likely to succeed in life when compared to the self-assessment offered by graduates in 1975.

Researchers Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell are worried that these young people are showing signs of excessive self-esteem, which may set them up for disappointments later in life.

As *USA Today* reports:

*Compared with the Baby Boomers who were seniors in 1975, 12th-graders surveyed in 2006 were much more confident they'd be "very good" employees, mates and parents, and they were more self-satisfied overall, say Twenge and co-author W. Keith Campbell of the University of Georgia. Between half and two-thirds of the Gen Y teens gave themselves top ratings, compared with less than half in their parents' generation. The report is in 'Psychological Science.'*

*Boomer parents "are more likely than their parents were to praise children — and maybe over praise them," Twenge says. This can foster great expectations or perhaps even smugness about one's chances of reaching "the stars" at work and in family life, she adds. "Their narcissism could be a recipe for depression later when things don't work out as well as they expected."*

All this reminds me of Garrison Keillor's fictional community of Lake Wobegon, where all of the kids are "above average." That simply isn't possible, but there is good reason to believe that many current parenting strategies imply that it is.

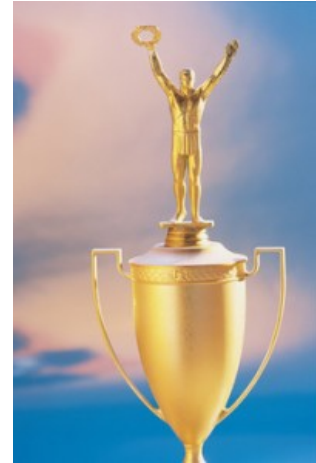
In recent years, some observers have warned that children are not well served when parents lavish them with inordinate praise or with unrealistic assessments. The culture of earned recognition has given way to sports teams that award a trophy to every player and to contests in which every participant wins.

As they grow older, some children turn cynical about all this. They just begin to discount what their parents, educators, or other authorities tell them. Eventually, reality intrudes in the form of college admissions, athletic scholarships, or other dimensions of merited recognition. It may be that every player on the 8th grade team gets the same trophy, regardless of performance on the field. All that changes when it comes time for college athletic scholarships, however. Those are not passed out without regard for performance.

Other children bask in the glory of unmerited praise. Educators talk of children who insist that they should receive an "A" on a paper or test because "I am an 'A' person." Some children reach young adulthood with no real help from parents in understanding their place in the world — or about what it might take for them to get where they want to go.

Roy Baumeister of Florida State University states his concern memorably:

*"Many people who grew up in the '50s say, 'Nothing I did was ever good enough for my parents.' Now we're seeing*



*the pendulum swing, and you hear from coaches and teachers who have been at it a while that kids have become more fragile. They don't take criticism well," he says.*

*"Thinking you're God's gift to the world is nice for you. It's a little harder for everyone else around you."*

Every child is special. And we certainly hope that these children exceed all expectations about their future excellence in all areas of life. Nevertheless, a little reality might help, and some honesty as well.

When secular observers express this kind of concern, Christian parents should take particular notice. We should encourage our children to excellence in all things — not so much for their self-esteem but for the glory of God. And, we must be honest with them about what this excellence would mean and what this standard will require.

That kind of reality therapy will be as good for the parents as for the children. As the Apostle Paul reminds us:

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. [Romans 12:3]*

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