tactics are commonly aversive to their peers. Accordingly, this group is often labelled as narcissistic because they appear to exaggerate their own importance. However, along with Brené Brown, I believe this label is mistaken: their self-esteem is not in fact inflated but low, while the feeling behind their obnoxious behaviours is a fear of being ordinary.\textsuperscript{16} In essence, the feeling is one of shame at not being enough (not good enough, not clever enough, not athletic enough, not attractive enough . . . or any other imposed standard). Outsiders are commonly tempted to ‘take them down a peg’, but in reality they are already ‘down’—and kicking them while they are there will not help.

A low self-esteem is stable because, any time these people might start to feel better about their \textit{competence}, their self-esteem is dragged down by their persistent reservations about their \textit{worth}. These deep doubts come about when parents criticise and invalidate children and their feelings, as a result of which the children come to see themselves as unwelcome and unworthy.\textsuperscript{17} Compared with a sense of incompetence, a sense of low worth is more resistant to change.

\textbf{Figure 7.4 Low self-esteem}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{low_self_esteem.png}
\end{figure}

\textit{Repairing low self-esteem}

When children have low self-esteem about their competence, it is hard (but not impossible) to repair. First, they can change their ideals by devaluing a skill at which they are incompetent.\textsuperscript{18} For example, I am a poor swimmer, but I don’t care because the statistics are on my side: namely, adults who don't swim don't drown. (You can't drown on dry land, right?) Children who fail at school use this solution: they decide not to care about academic learning.

A second solution is to channel themselves into something else where they \textit{can} excel. Again, what they have done here is change their ideals so that we can measure up to a
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cannot excel to avoid learning, while instilling an achievement-driven self-esteem in those who are capable.

Given that our worth is more fundamental to us than our competence, when we have staked our self-esteem on competence, no matter how successful we become, unless we do some serious emotional work on ourselves beyond the childhood years, we will continue to doubt our worth—and this doubt will pull down our overall assessment of ourselves; hence the downward arrow in Figure 7.5.

**Figure 7.5 Achievement-driven self-esteem**

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**Authentic high self-esteem**

An authentic high self-esteem (illustrated in Figure 7.6) is secure and genuine because we gain it from unconditional love and acceptance. As a result, our self-worth is well anchored, without the need for constant validation and without the compulsion to prove ourselves by outdoing others. When we have an authentic high self-esteem, we feel competent to take achievement risks and worthy enough to sustain a failure. This is because failure—even at skills that matter to us—will not imperil our overall self-esteem, because our sense of worth is not reliant on our achievements. Accordingly, although (as indicated by the double-headed arrow in Figure 7.6) our self-esteem about our *competence* will fluctuate a little in response to successes or failures, on the whole we will use failure as a guide to future action rather than as a message about our *worthiness*. In other words, an authentic self-esteem acts as a reservoir of self-respect that protects us from interpreting failures as a message about our worth. Because this form of self-esteem is not earned, it cannot be taken away. It is neither undeserved nor inflated because it has developed unconditionally.
Infants gain their sense of worth from being accepted and validated, and from receiving affirmation from their parents. As a result, they mature into adopting the stance, ‘If I like myself, others will like me too’. That is, beyond the early childhood years, they become healthily independent of the judgments of others.

**Promote competence**

Individuals’ esteem about their competence is largely the result of their past successes and failures. Therefore, we need to ensure that children experience meaningful success. Children will feel best about themselves and their abilities when they are meeting meaningful challenges and putting in some real effort. To that end, the measures in chapter 5 will be relevant.

**Promote worth**

As shown in Figure 3.1 (see page 53), three core processes help children to feel both worthy and connected to others: acceptance, validation that they matter and affirming feedback. They need to believe with certainty that the world is a better place for having them in it.

**Acceptance**

As I described in chapter 2, children need us to accept them as separate and unique individuals with their own lives, opinions, interests, needs, values and feelings. Therefore, guidance employs a compassionate style. To be compassionate means to cross