

Building Healthy Self-Esteem in Children

Sometimes it's easy to notice when kids seem to feel good about themselves — and when they don't. We often describe this idea of feeling good about ourselves as "**self-esteem.**"

Kids who have healthy self-esteem tend to:

- feel valued and accepted
- feel confident that they can do what's expected
- feel proud of a job well done
- think good things about themselves
- feel prepared for everyday challenges

Kids with low self-esteem often:

- feel self-critical and are hard on themselves
- feel insecure, or not as good as other kids
- focus on the times they fail rather than the times they succeed
- lack confidence
- doubt their ability to do well at things

Why Self-Esteem Matters

When children feel good about themselves, it sets them up for success — in everything from school to friendships. Positive feelings like self-acceptance or self-confidence help kids try new challenges, cope with mistakes, and try again. Taking pride in their abilities and accomplishments helps kids do their best.

By contrast, kids with low self-esteem might feel unsure of themselves. If they think others won't accept them, they may not participate as often. They may allow themselves to be treated poorly and have a hard time standing up for themselves. Kids who don't expect to do well may avoid challenges, give up easily, or be unable to bounce back from mistakes.

Having low self-esteem can block success. It can leave kids distracted by the stress of how to deal with everyday challenges.

How Self-Esteem Develops

Contrary to what some might think, self-esteem does not come telling kids they're wonderful, special, and great (even though they are!). Giving every child a trophy doesn't

help kids' self-esteem. Indeed, it's possible for kids to feel good about themselves even when they fail.

When children compete — win or lose — they see that their own hard work and practice can make a difference. Earning a prize contributes to self-esteem only when a kid knows he or she earned it.

*Self-esteem is the result of experiences that help a child feel **capable, effective, and accepted.***

- When kids learn to do things for themselves and feel proud of what they can do, they feel **capable**.
- Children feel **effective** when they see that good things come from efforts like trying hard, getting close to a goal, or making progress. For example, kids who take part in a service project feel good about themselves when they see how their actions matter.
- When kids feel **accepted** and understood by a parent or someone close, they are likely to accept themselves, too. Their good feelings about themselves multiply as parents praise good behaviors, help when needed, and give encouragement and support.
- **Be a good role model.** When you put effort into everyday tasks (like raking the leaves, making a meal, cleaning up the dishes, or washing the car), you're setting a good example. Your child learns to put effort into doing homework, cleaning up toys, or making the bed.

Modeling the right attitude counts, too. When you do tasks cheerfully (or at least without grumbling or complaining), you teach your child to do the same. When you avoid rushing through chores and take pride in a job well done, you teach your child to do that, too.

- **Ban harsh criticism.** The messages kids hear about themselves from others easily translate into how they feel about themselves. Harsh words ("You're so lazy!") are harmful, not motivating. When kids absorb negative messages about themselves, they feel bad about themselves, and act accordingly.
- **Focus on strengths.** Pay attention to what your child does well and enjoys. Make sure your child has opportunities to develop these strengths. Nurturing strengths is better than focusing on weaknesses if you want to help kids feel good about themselves and succeed.

A positive sense of self is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child. Children with high self-esteem feel loved and competent and develop into happy, productive people. To help build your child's positive self-image as he grows, consider these dos and don'ts. Do give children choices.

- 1. Do give children choices.** Giving children choices within a reasonable set of options preselected by you makes them feel empowered. For example, at breakfast you might offer your child the option of eggs or pancakes. Learning to make simple choices while he's young will help prepare your child for the more difficult choices he'll face as he grows.
- 2. Don't do everything for him/her.** Be patient and let her work things out for herself. For example, it may be faster and easier to dress your preschooler, but letting her do it herself helps her learn new skills. The more she meets new challenges, the more competent and confident she'll feel.
- 3. Do let him/her know no one is perfect.** And explain that no one expects him to be. The way you react to your child's mistakes and disappointments colors the way he will react.
- 4. Don't gush or offer insincere praise.** Kids are masters at detecting insincere praise or baseless compliments. Praise your child often, but be specific in your compliments so your words don't ring hollow. For instance, instead of reacting to your child's latest drawing with, "Wow, that's great. You're the best artist in the world," try something like, "I really like how you drew the whole family. You even included details like Daddy's beard."
- 5. Do assign age-appropriate household chores.** Give children responsibility for tasks such as setting the table, walking the dog, and folding laundry. They'll increase their feelings of competency and bolster their problem-solving skills.
- 6. Don't draw comparisons between your children.** Instead, appreciate each one's individuality and special gifts.
- 7. Don't call children names or use sarcasm to make a point.** Never belittle your child's feelings. When you get angry take a short break so you don't say anything you'll regret. And keep in mind, you can dislike a child's actions without disliking the child. Be sure to illustrate the difference to your child.
- 8. Do spend one-on-one time with your child.** Whether it's grabbing a bite to eat or taking a bike ride, try to schedule some alone time with your child at least once a week. This is a great opportunity to talk about what's on her mind and to cement the bond the two of you share.