

Building Self Esteem in Children

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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 with self-esteem:

- feel liked and accepted
- feel confident
- feel proud of what they can do
- think good things about themselves
- believe in themselves



Kids with low self-esteem:

- are self-critical and hard on themselves
- feel they're not as good as other kids
- think of the times they fail rather than when they succeed
- lack confidence
- doubt they can do things well

Why Self-Esteem Matters

Kids who feel good about themselves have the confidence to try new things. They are more likely to try their best. They feel proud of what they can do. Self-esteem helps kids cope with mistakes. It helps kids try again, even if they fail at first. As a result, self-esteem helps kids do better at school, at home, and with friends.

Kids with low self-esteem feel unsure of themselves. If they think others won't accept them, they may not join in. They may let others treat them poorly. They may have a hard time standing up for themselves. They may give up easily, or not try at all. Kids with low self-esteem find it hard to cope when they make a mistake, lose, or fail. As a result, they may not do as well as they could.

How Self-Esteem Develops

Self-esteem can start as early as babyhood. It develops slowly over time. It can start just because a child feels safe, loved, and accepted. It can start when a baby gets positive attention and loving care.

As babies become toddlers and young children, they're able to do some things all by themselves. They feel good about themselves when they can use their new skills. Their self-esteem grows when parents pay attention, let a child try, give smiles, and show they're proud.

As kids grow, self-esteem can grow too. Any time kids try things, do things, and learn things can be a chance for self-esteem to grow. This can happen when kids:

- make progress toward a goal
- learn things at school
- make friends and get along
- learn skills — music, sports, art, cooking, tech skills
- practice favorite activities
- help, give, or be kind
- get praise for good behaviors
- try hard at something
- do things they're good at and enjoy
- are included by others
- feel understood and accepted
- get a prize or a good grade they know they've earned

When kids have self-esteem, they feel confident, capable, and accepted for who they are.

How Parents Can Build Self-Esteem

Every child is different. Self-esteem may come easier to some kids than others. And some kids face things that can lower their self-esteem. But even if a child's self-esteem is low, it can be raised.

Here are things parents can do to help kids feel good about themselves:

Help your child learn to do things. At every age, there are new things for kids to learn. Even during babyhood, learning to hold a cup or take first steps sparks a sense of mastery and delight. As your child grows, things like learning to dress, read, or ride a bike are chances for self-esteem to grow.

When teaching kids how to do things, show and help them at first. Then let them do what they can, even if they make mistakes. Be sure your child gets a chance to learn, try, and feel proud. Don't make new challenges too easy — or too hard.

Praise your child, but do it wisely. Of course, it's good to praise kids. Your praise is a way to show that you're proud. But some ways of praising kids can actually backfire.

Here's how to do it right:

- **Don't overpraise.** Praise that doesn't feel earned doesn't ring true. For example, telling a child he played a great game when he knows he didn't feels hollow and fake. It's better to say, "I know that wasn't your best game, but we all have off days. I'm proud of you for not giving up." Add a vote of confidence: "Tomorrow, you'll be back on your game."
- **Praise effort.** Avoid focusing praise only on results (such as getting an A) or fixed qualities (such as being smart or athletic).
Instead, offer most of your praise for effort, progress, and attitude. For example: "You're working hard on that project," "You're getting better and better at these spelling tests," or, "I'm proud of you for practicing piano — you've really stuck with it." With this kind of praise, kids put effort into things, work toward goals, and try. When kids do that, they're more likely to succeed.

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 hear negative messages about themselves, it harms their self-esteem. Correct kids with patience. Focus on what you want them to do next time. When needed, show them how.

Focus on strengths. Pay attention to what your child does well and enjoys. Make sure your child has chances to develop these strengths. Focus more on strengths than weaknesses if you want to help kids feel good about themselves. This improves behavior too.

Let kids help and give. Self-esteem grows when kids get to see that what they do matters to others. Kids can help out at home, do a service project at school, or do a favor for a sibling. Helping and kind acts build self-esteem and other good feelings.

Kids talk: Explaining Self Esteem

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Self-esteem means you mostly feel good about yourself.



Kids with self-esteem:

- feel proud of what they can do
- see the good things about themselves
- believe in themselves, even when they don't do well at first
- feel liked and accepted
- accept themselves, even when they make mistakes

Low self-esteem means you don't feel very good about yourself.

Kids with low self-esteem:

- don't think they are as good as others
- don't feel liked or accepted
- think more about the times they fail, than the times they do well
- don't notice the good things about themselves
- are hard on themselves and give up easily

Which one seems more like you?



Self-Esteem Matters

Here are three things to know about self-esteem:

1. **Self-esteem helps you.** It gives you the courage to try new things. Or make new friends. With self-esteem, you believe in yourself. You know that good things can happen when you try. Self-esteem helps you when things don't go your way. It helps you accept mistakes. If you miss the soccer goal or lose a library book, you don't get too mad at yourself. You just try again. You find a way to do better.
2. **Low self-esteem can hurt you.** It makes kids feel unsure. They don't think they can do things well. With low self-esteem, kids might not try. They might not go after their goals. They might be afraid to fail. Low self-esteem makes losing seem worse than it is. It makes mistakes seem bigger than they are. It makes it hard to get over things that don't go well. Instead of trying again, kids with low self-esteem might give up.
3. **You can build your self-esteem.** Self-esteem can start with things parents say when a kid is very young. A parent might tell a baby, "Look what you can do — you're walking all by yourself!" Being told good things makes the baby feel proud and feel good. As you get older, self-esteem can grow. Parents and teachers can let you know they see good things in you. Friends can help you feel liked. You can build your own self-esteem too. Notice when you try new things. Notice when you learn to do something. Did you try a new sport? Did you learn to ride a bike, play a song, or do a math problem? Be happy and proud. You don't have to brag out loud, but you can give yourself a quiet little high-five. Yay, you!

How to Build Your Self-Esteem

Try these steps:

- **Make a list of the stuff you're good at.** Can you draw or sing? Are you a good reader? Are you good at a sport? Do you tell a good joke? If you're having trouble with your list, ask a parent or friend to help you with it.



- **Practice the things you do well.** Think of ways you can do some of the things you're good at every



day.

- **Turn "I can't" into "I can!"** Does the little voice in your head tell you "I'm no good at this" or "I can't do it"? Or "It's too hard for me"? That's you thinking badly about yourself. Decide to change your mind. Think, "I can give it a try," "I can handle this." Think, "I'll give it my best." Think, "I'll ask someone to help me do this."

A poster titled "The Power of Yet" with a black border and white stars. It features four cartoon faces in the corners. The title "The Power of Yet" is in the center, with "The Power of" in blue and "Yet" in large purple letters. Below the title is a table comparing negative thoughts to positive ones with "yet".

Without the Power of Yet ☹️	With the Power of Yet 😊
I can't do this.	I can't do this...yet!
I don't get this.	I don't get this...yet!
This isn't working.	This isn't working...yet!
I can't figure this out.	I can't figure this out...yet!

Below the table is a drawing of a pink pencil with a blue eraser and a blue star pattern on the body.

- **Try your best.** You can feel good about yourself when you give something a good try. When you try hard, your self-esteem will grow.



- **Spend time with people who love you.** Do things you enjoy with your parent or family. It helps you know you belong. And that builds self-esteem.



- **Pitch in.** Do nice things for parents. Help with meals, clean up, or feed the pet. When you do kind things, you feel good about yourself. You get to see that what you do means a lot.

