

## Helping Your Child Build Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is an essential ingredient for all aspects of your child's healthy development and a key ingredient for school success. Confidence is a belief in your ability to master your body, behavior, and the challenges you encounter in the larger world. Children who are confident are eager to learn new skills and face new challenges. They also expect adults to be helpful and supportive of their efforts. Self-confidence is also crucial for getting along with others and working out the many social challenges—such as sharing, competition, and making friends—that children face in school settings. Self-confident children see that other people like them and expect relationships to be satisfying and fun.

How does self-confidence develop? Babies are born with no real sense of themselves as separate and distinct beings. They learn who they are primarily through their interactions and experiences with others. Primary caregivers—parents, relatives, caregivers, and teachers—reflect back to children their unique strengths and special attributes. In large part, a child's sense of confidence is shaped and nurtured (or not) by those who care for him. Watch how confidence grows across the first three years of life:

- A newborn cries and is comforted by her parent. This baby is learning that she is loved, important, and worthy of soothing.
- An 8-month-old shakes a rattle and smiles at the sound it makes. His caregiver says, "You figured out how the rattle works! Nice job!" This baby is learning he is a clever problem-solver.
- A toddler takes a stool to reach her favorite toy—dad's cell phone—on the countertop. "I can't let you play with my phone," says the girl's father, "But how about playing with this?" He hands her a toy phone and she happily begins making calls. This toddler is learning that her interests are important and will be respected and supported (within limits) by those who love her.
- A 3-year-old sobs as his parents leave for a night out on the town...without him. They help him calm down and get settled with his babysitter. This toddler is learning that his feelings are important and that his parents will listen and respond to him when he is distressed.

**Below are ways you can nurture your child's self-confidence through your everyday interactions together.**

**Establish routines with your baby or child.** When events are predictable, when they happen in approximately the same way at approximately the same time each day, your child will feel safe, secure, confident and in control of his world. He knows that, for example, bath comes first, then books, then songs and then bedtime. He understands the what will happen next and can prepare himself for those changes. If day-to-day events seem to occur randomly, it can cause children a lot of anxiety. If life doesn't make sense, it may feel too scary to fully explore. When children know what to expect, they are free to play, grow, and learn.

**Allow for and facilitate plenty of opportunity for play.** Play is how children learn about themselves, other people, and world around them. Through play, children also learn how to solve problems and develop confidence —finding the ball behind the couch, getting the right shape into its hole, getting the jack-in-the-box to pop up. An infant who successfully presses a button on a toy that produces a pleasant sound is learning that he can make something happen.

It is also through play that children learn how it feels to be someone else, to try on new roles and to work out complicated feelings. A two-year old who dresses up, playing a mommy going off to work, may be working out her feelings about separations. A three-year old playing Power Rangers may be practicing being more assertive, mastering fears or venting aggressive feelings. Let your child lead playtime—this will build his confidence, assertiveness, and leadership skills.

**Help your child learn to be a problem-solver.** Help your child work through problems, but don't always solve them for her. Move the blocks on the bottom of the tower so they are a little more stable, but don't put the tall one on top—let her figure out how to make it balance. This way you give her the chance to feel successful.

If your child is building a block house on the rug and it keeps falling, you could:

- Tell her that you see how frustrated she is
- Ask her if she knows what may be causing the problem
- Offer your observations, i.e., that the rug is soft so the blocks aren't stable
- Ask if she has any ideas about what might make them steadier
- Ask if she wants suggestions: "How about making it on the hard floor?"

The goal is to guide and support your child in her problem-solving efforts but not do for her what she has the skills to accomplish herself. Sometimes, your child's times of greatest frustration are in fact golden opportunities for her to develop feelings of confidence, competence and mastery. She'll learn that she can depend on you to encourage her. Meanwhile, she's the one who finds the solution.

**Give your child responsibilities.** Feeling useful and needed makes children feel important and builds confidence. Jobs should be age-appropriate. Very young children can sort laundry with you, help feed pets, water plants, and pick up toys. Be specific about what is expected. Say, "Please put a napkin on each plate," not "Help me set the table."

**Celebrate your child's successes.** Showing your child that you recognize how he is growing and learning helps to build his confidence. Make a photo album of his accomplishments. Take pictures of your child struggling to climb onto a chair, and one of your child sitting in it proudly.

**Encourage your child to try to master tasks he is struggling with.** Children learn by doing. Break down difficult tasks into manageable steps to help him feel in control, confident, and safe. For example, if he is learning to put his shoes on:

- Unlace his shoes and open them for him
- Line them up so he can step in
- Let him lean on you while he steps in
- Guide his hand, if necessary, as he fastens the shoes
- Tell him: "Nice job getting your shoes on!"

As you work on a task or skill that is tough for your child—like making the transition to training wheels or learning to go down the big slide—let him know you believe in him, but also communicate that you will not be disappointed if he isn't yet ready. You are there to support him whenever he is ready to try again. When children feel in control, they feel strong in the world.

**Provide language for your child's experience** that accurately reflects his experience, shows understanding and empathy, and instills confidence. "You tried to pour your own juice. Good for you. Some juice is in the cup. Some spilled. You look sad about that. Here, wipe it up with this sponge. That pitcher is heavy for little hands. I'll give you a smaller one and you can try again."

**Be a role model yourself.** Children are always keenly watching their parents for clues about what to do or how to feel about different tasks or social interactions. When it comes to learning how to manage emotions like hurt, anger, or frustration, you are their "go-to" person. If you can model persistence and confidence in yourself, your child will learn this too. Try new things and praise yourself aloud. "I was really frustrated putting up that shelf. It was hard to do. When it fell, I was mad. I rested and tried again. Now I'm proud of myself for getting the job done and not giving up."

If you can say to your child when you are angry, "I don't like that you threw that ball at me. I know you are angry and that's o.k. But throwing hurts. You can tell me why you are mad and hit this pillow if you have to do something with your body." You are not only addressing your child's behavior, and offering alternatives, but the way you are dealing with your anger gives your child a healthy model for coping with strong feelings.