

From the Health Clinic



Raising Confident Children

It takes confidence to be a kid. Whether going to a new school or stepping up to bat for the first time, children face a lot of uncharted territory.

Naturally, parents want to instill a can-do attitude in their children so that they will bravely take on new challenges and, over time, believe in themselves. While each child is a little different, parents can follow some general guidelines to build children's confidence.

Self-confidence rises out of a sense of competence. In other words, children develop confidence not because parents tell them they are great, but because of their achievements, big and small. Sure, it is good to hear encouraging words from mom and dad. But words of praise mean more when they refer to a child's specific efforts or new abilities.

When children achieve something, whether it is brushing their own teeth or riding a bike, they get a sense of themselves as able and capable, and tap into that high-octane fuel of confidence.

Building self-confidence can begin very early. When babies learn to turn the pages of a book or toddlers learn to walk, they are getting the idea "I can do it!" With each new skill and milestone, children can develop increasing confidence.

Parents can help by giving children lots of opportunities to practice and master their skills, letting children make mistakes and being there to boost their spirits so they keep trying. Respond with interest and excitement when children show off a new skill, and reward them with praise when they achieve a goal or make a good effort.

With plentiful opportunities, good instruction, and lots of patience from parents, children can master basic skills - like tying their shoes and making the bed. Then, when other important challenges present themselves, children can approach them knowing that they have already been successful in other areas.

Stay on the Sidelines

Of course, supervision is important to ensure that children stay safe. But to help them really learn a new skill, it is also important not to hover. Give children the opportunity to try something new, make mistakes, and learn from them.

For instance, if your son wants to learn how to make a peanut butter sandwich, demonstrate, set up the ingredients, and let him give it a try. Will he make a bit of a mess? Almost certainly - but don't swoop in the second some jelly hits the countertop. In fact, avoid any criticism that could discourage him from trying again. If you step in to finish the sandwich, your son will think, "Oh well, I guess I can't make sandwiches."

But if you have patience for the mess and the time it takes to learn, the payoff will be real. Someday soon he'll be able to say, "I'm hungry for lunch, so I'm going to make my own sandwich." You might even reply, "Great, can you make me one, too?" What a clear sign of your faith in his abilities!

Offer Encouragement and Praise

Sometimes, children give up when frustrations arise. Help by encouraging persistence in the midst of setbacks. By trying again, children learn that obstacles can be overcome.

Once children reach a goal, you will want to praise not only the end result but also their willingness to stick with it. For instance, after your son has mastered making that peanut butter sandwich you might show your confidence by saying, "Next time, do you want to learn how to crack an egg?" Sandwich-fixing and egg-cracking might not seem like huge achievements, but they are important steps in the right direction - toward your child's independence.

Throughout childhood, parents have chances to prepare children to take care of themselves. Sure, it is great to feel needed, but as children steadily gain confidence and independence, their relationship with you can be even richer. You can be bonded, not just by dependence, but by love and shared pride in all they have achieved.

Eventually, your grown-up children just might say thanks for how prepared they feel for the road ahead - a road they can take with confidence.

