

9 Secrets of Confident Kids

By Alina Tugend, *Parents Magazine* May 2008, *parents.com*, April 2008

Many researchers say that it's more important to help kids feel competent than confident. Here are the most effective ways to help your child become happy, self-assured, and successful.

Consider your compliments

Of course, young kids need plenty of encouragement, whether they're learning to crawl, throw a ball, or draw a circle. But your child can get so accustomed to hearing "Good job!" that he may have a hard time realizing when his accomplishments are really worth celebrating. He'll also sense when you're exaggerating ("That's the best block tower I have ever seen!") and may start ignoring your compliments. Don't praise your child if he does something that he's supposed to do. When he brushes his teeth or throws his shirt into the hamper, for example, a simple "thank you" is sufficient. Try to offer specific feedback: Instead of saying that your child's drawing is gorgeous, you might point out his nice use of purple.

Don't rescue your child

It's natural to want to prevent your child from getting hurt, feeling discouraged, or making mistakes, but when you intervene-trying to get her invited to a birthday party she wasn't included in, or pressuring the soccer coach to give her more game time-you're not doing her any favors. Kids need to know that it's okay to fail, and that it's normal to feel sad, anxious, or angry, says Robert Brooks, Ph.D., coauthor of *Raising Resilient Children*. They learn to succeed by overcoming obstacles, not by having you remove them. "It's particularly important for young children to have the chance to play and take risks without feeling that their parents will criticize or correct them for doing something wrong," says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Temple University, in Philadelphia. She even encourages parents to make their own little mistakes on purpose. "Seeing you mess up and not make a big deal about it will make little kids feel so much better."

Let him make decisions

When your child gets the chance to make choices from a young age, he'll gain confidence in his own good judgment. Of course, kids love to run the show, but having too much control can be overwhelming; it's best to give your child two or three options to choose from. For example, don't ask your 3-year-old what he wants for lunch, but offer pasta or peanut butter and jelly. At the same time, let your child know certain choices are up to you. Gloria Kushel's 8-year-old daughter, Caroline, likes to dress like a boy and wear her hair cropped short. "I decided that I would let her make those choices, but other things, like whether she practices piano, aren't up for a vote," says Kushel, of Mamaroneck, New York.

Focus on the glass half full

If your child tends to feel defeated by disappointments, help her be more optimistic. Instead of offering glib reassurances to "look on the bright side," encourage her to think about specific ways to improve a situation and bring her closer to her goals, says Karen Reivich, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Optimistic Child*. If she's behind her classmates in reading, explain that everyone learns at her own pace, and offer to spend extra time reading with her. If she's crushed because she didn't get the lead in the second-grade play, don't say, "Well, I think you're a star." Instead, say, "I can see how disappointed you are. Let's come up with a plan for how you can increase the chances of getting the part you want next time."

Nurture his special interests

Try to expose your child to a wide variety of activities, and encourage him when he finds something he really loves. Kids who have a passion-whether it's dinosaurs or cooking-feel proud of their expertise and are more likely to be successful in other areas of their life. Quirky hobbies may be particularly helpful for children who have a hard time fitting in at school-and you can also help your child take advantage of his interest to connect with other kids. For example, if your son likes to draw but most of the boys in his class are into sports, encourage him to do sports drawings. Or he could put together a book of his artwork and show it to the class.

Promote problem solving

"Kids are confident when they're able to negotiate getting what they want," says Myrna Shure, Ph.D., author of *Raising a Thinking Child*. Her research has found that you can teach even a young child how to solve problems herself. The key is to bite your tongue. If your child comes to you and complains that a kid took her truck at the playground, ask what she thinks would be a good way to get it back. Even if her first idea is to grab the truck, ask her what she thinks might happen if she did. Then ask, "Can you think of other ways to get it back so that doesn't happen?" In one of Dr. Shure's studies of this situation, 4-year-olds came up with surprisingly mature ideas, like telling the truck-grabber, "You'll have more fun if you play with me than if you play by yourself."

Look for ways to help others

When children feel like they're making a difference-whether it's passing out cups at preschool or taking cookies to a nursing home-they feel more confident, says Dr. Brooks. It's good for kids to have their own household responsibilities, but it may be even more empowering for a young child to assist you with a project ("I could really use your help!"). He'll see firsthand that grown-up tasks require effort, and he'll be easier on himself when he has to work at things in the future, says Dr. Hirsh-Pasek.

Find opportunities for her to spend more time with adults

Kids like to hang out with their friends, but it's also important for them to be around a variety of grown-ups. Spending time with older people expands your child's world, forces her to talk to adults besides you, and gives her different ways of thinking. Research has

also shown that having a close relationship with a particular grown-up—a teacher, an uncle, a babysitter, or a friend's parent—makes children more resilient.

Fantasize about the future

If kids can envision themselves doing something important or fulfilling when they grow up, they're bound to feel more confident now. Talk to your child about how you, your spouse, and other adults he knows chose careers. Your child may dream of being a pop singer or an astronaut, but don't try to lower his expectations. Even if he changes his mind, the important thing is that he's thinking about his goals.

###