

## Building Self-Esteem in Children

Most parents have heard that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” and it’s especially true with self-esteem in children. All children need love and appreciation and thrive on positive attention. Yet, how often do parents forget to use words of encouragement such as, “that’s right,” “wonderful,” or “good job”? No matter the age of children or adolescents, good parent-child communication is essential for raising children with self-esteem and confidence.

Self-esteem is an indicator of good mental health. It is how we feel about ourselves. Poor self-esteem is nothing to be blamed for, ashamed of, or embarrassed about. Some self-doubt, particularly during adolescence, is normal—even healthy—but poor self-esteem should not be ignored. In some instances, it can be a symptom of a mental health disorder or emotional disturbance.

Parents can play important roles in helping their children feel better about themselves and developing greater confidence. Doing this is important because children with good self-esteem:

- Act independently
- Assume responsibility
- Take pride in their accomplishments
- Tolerate frustration
- Handle peer pressure appropriately
- Attempt new tasks and challenges
- Handle positive and negative emotions
- Offer assistance to others

Words and actions have great impact on the confidence of children, and children, including adolescents, remember the positive statements parents and caregivers say to them. Phrases such as “I like the way you...” or “You are improving at...” or “I appreciate the way you...” should be used on a daily basis. Parents also can smile, nod, wink, pat on the back, or hug a child to show attention and appreciation.

What else can parents do?

• **Be generous with praise.** Parents must develop the habit of looking for situations in which children are doing good jobs, displaying talents, or



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demonstrating positive character traits. Remember to praise children for jobs well done and for effort.

• **Teach positive self-statements.**

It is important for parents to redirect children’s inaccurate or negative beliefs about themselves and to teach them how to think in positive ways.

• **Avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame.** Blame and negative judgments are at the core of poor self-esteem and can lead to emotional disorders.

• **Teach children about decision-making and to recognize when they have made good decisions.** Let them “own” their problems. If they solve them, they gain confidence in themselves. If you solve them, they’ll remain dependent on you. Take the time to answer questions. Help children think of alternative options.

• **Show children that you can laugh at yourself.** Show them that life doesn’t need to be serious all the time and that some teasing is all in fun. Your sense of humor is important for their well-being.

The *Caring for Every Child’s Mental Health Campaign*, part of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program of the Federal Center for Mental Health Services, wants parents and caregivers to know that the physical and mental well-being of every child is important. Parents and caregivers who wish to learn more about children’s mental health should call 1-800-789-2647 (toll-free) or visit [www.mentalhealth.org/child](http://www.mentalhealth.org/child) to download a free publications catalog (Order No. CA-0000). The Federal Center for Mental Health Services is an agency of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.