

# Parents' Guide to Nurturing Self-Confidence

One of the best things we can do for our children is to instil a strong sense of self-confidence. This doesn't necessarily mean they will be the loudest child in the room – quiet, more introverted people can still be confident, and louder people are often masking insecurity. But self-confidence is key to maintaining good mental health in later life, so the more we can do when our children are young, the better.

## 1 Don't rescue your child

Hard though it may be, resist the urge to 'step in' every time your child faces a difficulty. You may wish to try to get them invited to parties, or want them to be the one to take a penalty in a football match, but the more you do this, the more you are telling your child that they can't do things for themselves.

## 2 Don't do everything for your child

If you do everything for your child, you are simply teaching them that you will always do it for them, or better than them. Depending on your child's age, you should expect them to be increasingly independent with tasks such as dressing themselves, completing homework, carrying their own bags, and taking responsibility for organising themselves.

## 3 Praise effort, not outcome

Everybody makes mistakes and gets things wrong, and most people cope and move on. But someone with fragile self-confidence can become hung up on their perceived failures and mistakes and unable to focus on the positives. Praise the effort your child puts in rather than the outcome. 'I know you didn't get 10 out of 10 in that test, but you tried really hard to learn the words, so well done. Let's see what we can do to make it better next time.'

## 4 Nurture optimism and 'stickability'

In the same way, when your child faces setbacks, encourage them to be optimistic and learn from their mistakes rather than being despondent and thinking this means they are no good at a task or skill. Praise the hard work and effort they put in, or the fact that they didn't give up – let them see that there is achievement in trying even if we don't succeed. 'What matters is not how many times you fall, but whether you pick yourself up again.'

## 5 Choose what to praise

Praise loses its meaning if given too often. Don't praise your child if they do something you would normally expect them to do, such as putting their dirty clothes in the laundry basket. Don't gush with effusive praise over every little thing they achieve. Choose instead to focus on bigger things, or on one aspect of a piece of work. For example, instead of saying 'I love your painting, it's brilliant!' say, 'I love how you used small brushstrokes to show the leaves in the tree.' If your child is quiet or nervous, give them specific praise when they overcome their nerves: 'I know you were nervous about going to that party, but you went and you joined in – well done!'

## 6 Let your child make decisions

Choose wisely, but let your child have some say in the things that happen to them. This will make them see that they have control over decisions. Obviously, they should still know that there are certain decisions that parents will still make, such as what time to go to bed on a school night!

## 7 Encourage their passions

Whatever your child enjoys, nurture it and value it. Whether they are an avid reader, excellent at chess, a great dancer or amazing at programming, let them explore, learn and grow in something that they love.

## 8 Don't label them – and don't let others

If your child is quiet or shy, don't label them as such, especially not in front of them. If someone else says, 'Oh, he's so shy,' counteract this by saying something like, 'no, he just prefers to observe a situation before he joins in', or 'he's a thinker first and a doer second.'

## 9 Don't dismiss their feelings

Listen to your child when they are telling you how they feel, and respond positively. Tell them you understand that they feel nervous or lacking in confidence, and that this is quite normal, but you are going to help them to deal with it.

## 10 Normalise doubts

If your child is nervous about a social situation or a task they are facing, talk about how it's quite normal to feel this way, and that sometimes feeling nervous can boost our performance. If appropriate, talk about times when you have felt nervous and what you did about it.

## 11 Promote problem solving

If your child is faced with a situation in which they feel low confidence, talk beforehand about what they can do to make it easier. If they are worried about a social situation such as a party, envisage what will happen as they arrive – where could they go, who could they talk to first, what should they say? If you feel comfortable, act out a role play, modelling good interactions for your child. If they are nervous about a test, talk about the need to prepare in advance and the importance of trying hard and doing your best.

## 12 Look for ways to help others

It is a real boost to self-confidence to be able to give something back. Let your child get involved with a charity event such as a fun run, or help them to have a clear out of old clothes and toys and donate them to a charity shop. Alternatively, your child and a friend could arrange a fundraising event like a cake sale at school.

## 13 Give lots of affection

Lots of physical and verbal affection will ensure your child keeps feeling loved and valued by the people that matter the most.

It's worth remembering that many children – and adults – are naturally quiet, shy or introverted, and this does not mean they lack self-confidence. However, having confidence in social situations is an important skill for life, so it's always worth equipping children with the tools and skills they need to overcome shyness. If you feel your child is becoming chronically sad or withdrawn, if they persistently talk negatively about themselves, or you notice any other change in behaviour which concerns you, it may be that your child needs some professional support. Make an appointment to talk to your GP.

