



# Building confidence in children

Confident children are motivated to engage in more experiences, more able to build positive relationships, and become happier, successful adults.

## How does confidence develop?

### Babies are born curious

They want to touch, see, hear and taste everything within their reach. Toddlers and preschoolers demonstrate their need to understand the world around them world by asking many 'why' questions. From their repeated experiences of seeing their actions affect their world and the people in it, young children begin to see themselves as capable and having control. This helps them to feel good about themselves and builds their self-confidence.

### When they begin school, children typically start out with high expectations.

But when they see how they do things compared to others, their view of their own abilities often changes. They learn that they're good at some things and not so good at others. They also see how other children and educators respond to what they do. These things influence their confidence in their abilities, and how willing they are to have a go in situations where they feel unsure.

## What can educators do to help?

### Your response

The way adults respond to children as they explore their place in the world is their template for solving many challenging and difficult problems later on. When significant adults nurture the natural curiosity of young children, and demonstrate patience and interest, it helps strengthen their sense of self. In primary school, children who are suddenly less sure of themselves may need extra support and encouragement to build a functional sense of confidence they can take with them into adolescence.

### Building children's confidence helps them to try new things.

It allows them to develop social and emotional learning skills and tackle new tasks – even when they might be daunting or completely new. There are many ways that you can support children's developing confidence and sense of self.

## Give regular encouragement and praise

Praise is most effective when you're mindful of how and when you use it. When praising children, focus on their efforts and achievements.

Praise that's specific and acknowledges the processes of completing an activity or solving a problem helps develop children's learning and motivation. It teaches them what they're doing well. For example, you might say, "You put away your toys so nicely", "I noticed you were really trying hard at building that block tower" or "You've used so many bright colours in your painting." Children can then use this learning when they have similar experiences in the future.

## Self-motivated children tend to stick at things for longer

They feel a sense of control over what they're doing and are more likely to take on new challenges. When children feel they can achieve their goals, they feel good about themselves, which benefits their confidence.

Children's curiosity and confidence can vary depending on what they're doing and how they're feeling. Like adults, they can be motivated to do some activities more than others. Sometimes children can be less motivated because they feel tired or unwell or because of their temperament or personal style. Motivation is complex and can be influenced by many factors.

### Support children's motivation

- Provide an inviting and safe environment that can be explored in the presence of warm, caring and trusted adults.
- Scaffold children's learning and gradually reduce involvement over time.
- Ask children questions, talk them through activities, and praise their efforts.

Remember, motivation doesn't always need to be facilitated by adults – children can be very good at motivating each other too.

## Support self-esteem and optimism

### Self-esteem is an important part of confidence.

Having good self-esteem means children accepting and feeling positive about themselves. Confidence isn't just an individual feeling good but also knowing they're good at something.

Helpful ways for children and young people to think include:

- believing that if you try, you can succeed
- finding positive ways to cope with failure that encourage having another go
- enjoying learning for its own sake by competing with your own performance – not with others
- making sure that goals are achievable by breaking down large tasks or responsibilities into small steps
- knowing you can ask for help if you need it.

## Confidence involves dealing well with disappointment

### Everyone fails to achieve their goals sometimes – and this isn't a bad thing.

You can build children's ability to deal with challenges when you:

- respond sympathetically and with encouragement
- help children focus on what they can change to make things better, instead of thinking that the situation is unchangeable or that there's something wrong with them
- challenge "I can't" thinking by showing and saying you believe in them and reminding them of what they've achieved.

Optimism recognises what has been achieved more than what's lacking. It looks at the glass as half-full rather than half-empty. Adults can help children focus on their own effort and on achieving personal goals as the best way to measure success.

### Support children's confidence

Confidence improves through building on small successes.

You support children when you:

- explain that skills develop with practice

- make sure that goals are achievable by breaking down large tasks or responsibilities into small steps
- scaffold their learning and help when necessary, without taking over
- encourage them to persist when they don't succeed straightaway
- praise effort, persistence and individual improvement - focus on the child's effort rather than the outcome
- acknowledge what they've done well and not so well
- arrange safe and interesting spaces where they're free to explore and see the effects of their actions
- answer their questions appropriately – sometimes you won't know the answer, and that's OK
- ask them questions to help them solve problems and promote further learning
- help them experience that learning is fun.

## References

Beaty, J. (2014). Observing development of the young child (8th edn). New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Mann, M., Hosman, C., Schaalma, H., & De Vries, N. (2004). Self-esteem in a broad-spectrum approach for mental health promotion. Health Education Research, 19(4), 357-372.

Ricci, M., & Lee, M. (2016). Mindsets for parents: Strategies to encourage growth mindsets in kids. Texas: Prufrock Press.

## External links

Raising Children Network – [About self-esteem: children 1-8 years](#) / [Praise, encouragement and rewards](#) / [Confidence in teenagers](#)

ReachOut – [How to build self-confidence](#)