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How to help your child build self-esteem

As parents, it's natural to want to help our children thrive. And one thing we're all aware of is the importance of having healthy self-esteem to help them face the ups and downs of childhood more comfortably.

Sadly, there's no straightforward way to build [self-esteem](#). Each child is different and will have their own specific needs. "We're all born with a certain temperament, and some of us are more naturally susceptible to low self-esteem or [mental health](#) problems than others," explains Dr Sharie Coombes, Child Psychologist at [Foundations Therapy](#). "But there are things we can do to nudge children in the right direction."

Praising when it's due

It's natural to want to praise our children's efforts – especially if we're trying to boost their confidence. But praising each and every thing they do may actually have the opposite effect. "If we rave about something but the child doesn't feel they've put much effort in it can be confusing for them," explains Coombes. "This could see them expecting praise for very little effort in the real world, which could actually impair their self-esteem and confidence in the long run."

Instead, Coombes recommends asking children questions about their drawing or other achievement and commenting on positive aspects.

Encouraging a healthy outlook

We all want our children to reach their full potential. But that doesn't mean they can or should excel in every subject or life skill. "In order to be happy, we need to feel 'good enough' most of the time," explains Coombes. "Sometimes in modern society it can seem that we're trying to make children think they have to be good at everything – and it's just not possible."

"That's not to say we shouldn't strive to excel in things, but always looking to better any skill can lead to children feeling as if they're always falling short."

Giving them evidence

Every child comes with their own unique skills and traits – but they might not be able to see their value. So when you notice your child doing something great, take the time to say so. "Every now and then throw them by saying 'I really like the way you did that just then'," advises Coombes. "You're helping them to see evidence rather than simply telling them they're great." Commenting on a range of behaviours rather than focusing on just one area will also help children to realise the value of different actions and aspects of their character.

When it comes to commenting on looks, it's important to strike the right balance. Whilst some feel we shouldn't comment on children's appearance at all, Coombes believes that this may simply be ignoring an aspect of being human. "The reality is that we all look in the mirror and feel things about what looks back at us," she says. "So occasionally say: 'You look nice in that jumper' or 'Your eyes look lovely when you wear grey.' Compliment them on their appearance but help them to see things aren't fixed, that nothing is set."

Helping them find their niche

One of the ways in which we can build confidence is by helping children to find the thing they love, or are good at. So introducing them to a variety of activities can be helpful. "Involve the child in conversations about the things they'd like to try," advises Coombes. "Otherwise you may overwhelm them – they might feel they're rubbish at everything! Find out what they'd like to explore and support them in that."

According to Coombes this involves helping children to find activities in which they're out of their comfort zone, but not so far out that they feel completely incompetent. "There's a middle zone, known as the 'Zone of Proximal Development'," she says. "This is where you can achieve, as long as you have support from someone else. The right support at the right time can really build confidence, and developing mastery helps to build this confidence further."

Guiding their view

Children are surrounded by images of perfection online and on TV, whether high-profile sports stars, brilliant performers or models and influencers on social media. This is the world that children are growing up in, but it's important that they learn to see the images they are confronted with a bit of adult perspective and reason.

"Always add a mediator," advises Coombes. "If you see someone who looks great in a movie say, 'Isn't she strong! I wonder how often she had to go to the [gym?](#)', or 'Doesn't he look great; I wonder how much make-up he had to wear in this movie?'"

In this way, children will learn that whilst people can achieve greatness in different fields, most of these things come as a result of hard work or special filters. We don't just walk out of the door and run a [marathon](#).

If your child lacks confidence or you feel they could develop a greater sense of self-esteem it can feel worrying. Those with low-self-esteem may struggle more with social situations, and feelings of low self-worth may even lead to mental health problems in the future. None of us wants our children to struggle. But by helping them to discover and appreciate their strengths we can help to set them on the right path.

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