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Strategies to make your child's self-esteem soar

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Elizabeth Weiss McGolerick

Laying the cornerstone for your little one's confidence can feel like a daunting responsibility, but with the proper nurturing, your child's genetic gift of self-esteem can blossom. It is possible to encourage your child to believe in herself and in what she does while keeping her grounded and cultivating an open mind.



Stephanie Bourgeois, a licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist for children, adolescents and families in Summit, NJ – and also mother to one-year-old Chloe – advises parents first get in touch with and accept their child's unique, inborn temperament. "I see so many parents wanting to change their children or resisting their child's obvious tendencies," she says. "Parents must learn to teach their children to work with the strengths and weaknesses inherent to their temperament, rather than try to make their children someone they are not."

With that sentiment in mind, these five strategies can help your child's self-esteem soar:

1) Make your little ones feel big

How many times have you heard someone say, "My child is three going on 13"? Many children have an innate desire to take on challenges that are often well above their ability at their young age. Adriane Luksic, mother of Rowan (age 4) and Caden (age 2), looks for everyday situations that provide her with an opportunity to instill confidence, boost self-esteem, and reinforce a positive sense of self-awareness in her two pre-schoolers.

"I find myself actively looking for moments when I can make my little kids feel big by letting them know I'm so proud of them, not only for what they can do, but also for what they are trying to do." Likewise, if your child is demonstrating responsibility beyond his years, reward him with a privilege that might otherwise be beyond his years – let him stay home alone (within reason), date earlier than you intended (on a double-date, that is!) or something adult-ish but life lesson-filled, such as open a checking account.



2) Let them make mistakes

Instill in your little ones that being inquisitive is a positive trait – it's actually a sign of strength, not weakness to ask for help. But at the same time, encourage your child to figure things out on her own, and this might mean limiting your parental influence.

Growing up isn't easy to do, but you can't make life simpler for your child by trying to correct her errors before she feels the effects of a bad choice or a poor decision. "Too often parents rush in and interfere with learning," says

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Bourgeois. "It is a gift to let a child discover their world, explore, trust their judgment and intuition and decide for themselves." Perfection isn't critical – mistakes are inevitable in life – and you can impart to your child that an

error doesn't mean she isn't smart or a good person.

3) Nurture your child's passion

You love numbers. Your child is into abstract art. You thrive on dance. Your child could play chess all day long. Instead of lamenting the fact that you and your child don't have as much in common as you might like, develop an ongoing interest in what's important to your child, get involved, and encourage them to pursue what they love.

"Developing a connection with your child around her passion is a wonderful way to promote self-esteem and allow her to feel her own competence," Bourgeois explains. "You are sending the message, 'I want to protect and nurture your true self.'"

4) Play fair

Mary Fetzter, mother of Susan (age 10) and Isabelle (age 4 1/2), stresses the importance of teaching your children how to compete – fairly. She says, "Competition among children is stronger than ever – in academics, athletics, the arts – and part of competition is graciously accepting defeat."

Whether your child is playing in the big game or auditioning for the lead in the school play, the key is to encourage them to do their very best every time. Fetzter says, "As long as she gave it her all, she has nothing to feel bad about. Reassure her that no matter how much talent or ability another child has, it doesn't lessen hers."

5) Limit your praise

"We live in a praise-junkie culture where we have come to over-praise everything our children do, thinking it will build their self-esteem, yet it often does the opposite," says Bourgeois. Constant exaggeration can produce an unhealthy, inflated sense of self and entitlement. And because it feels so good to get that praise, children may perform just to receive praise rather than for the sheer pleasure they can gain from an activity.

Rather than performing for the sake of another's approval – something that can lead to performance anxiety – Bourgeois says, "Healthy self-esteem comes when children know what they love to do and actively participate in that activity." And genuine, heartfelt praise offered unexpectedly by a parent is the positive reinforcement that will mean the most to a child. Rather than "That's extraordinary!" or "You were the best!" a phrase like "You did a good job," is good enough. Bourgeois offers additional tips:

- Encourage goodwill by praising acts of selflessness you want to see more of. ("I like the way you kindly helped your sister with that project.")
- Limit generalizations and get specific when complementing the whole would feel insincere. ("That was a great catch!" rather than "You're the best football player.")
- Acknowledge effort by praising your child when they succeed in conquering something that doesn't come easily to them. ("You did so well in math this term! I know you worked hard for these grades.")

In a pop-culture world ripe with the message of instant gratification, one of the most important things you can do for our children is instill in them a strong sense of self. Peer pressure will never fade, but a child who is secure in his or her own interests will develop the kind of self-esteem that encourages them to believe in themselves and trust in their ability to bring to their life – through their own efforts – the things they desire most.

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