

The Importance of Positive Self-Esteem for Kids

By Bob Cunningham, EdM

At a Glance

- Kids with positive self-esteem feel good about themselves.
- They're more motivated to keep trying and to ask for help.
- You can help your child build positive self-esteem.

Self-esteem is how much people value themselves and how important they believe they are in their world. You might hear people talk about the importance of self-esteem in kids, and “positive self-esteem” in particular. But what exactly is it? And why does it matter so much?

Simply put, positive self-esteem is when people feel good about themselves. Learn more about positive self-esteem, and how to help your child build it.

Why Positive Self-Esteem Is Important for Kids

Kids with positive self-esteem feel confident and capable. They value themselves and their abilities. They're proud of the things they can do and want to try their best.

When kids are confident and secure about who they are, they're more likely to have a growth mindset. That means they can motivate themselves to take on new challenges and cope with and learn from mistakes. They're also more likely to stand up for themselves and ask for help when they need it.

How Kids Develop Positive Self-Esteem

Kids develop positive self-esteem by working hard toward a goal and seeing their hard work pay off over and over again. Accomplishing things shows them they have what it takes to face new challenges. Their success makes them feel good about themselves, and they learn that it's even OK to fail.

When kids do well at something, it also pleases other people, like their friends and the adults who care about them. That feedback also makes them feel good. And over time, they continue to build positive self-esteem.

When kids have positive self-esteem they:

- Feel respected
- Are resilient and feel proud even when they make a mistake

- Have a sense of control over activities and events in their life
- Act independently
- Take responsibility for their actions
- Are comfortable and secure in forming relationships
- Have the courage to make good decisions, even in the face of peer pressure

The Toll of Negative Self-Esteem on Kids

Many kids have trouble building and maintaining positive self-esteem, for lots of reasons. One common reason is when kids struggle in school.

If kids experience failure in school, they probably don't get a lot of positive feedback from adults or their classmates. The feedback they do get is often negative because they're constantly hearing about the things they didn't do well.

In some cases, they might get positive feedback that's not sincere. This can make them mistrust the adults who are supposed to be helping them. Or they might become wary of the kids who are supposed to be their "friends."

As a result, they feel less sure of themselves and their abilities. They may not feel motivated to try things that are hard for them, and have a tough time dealing with mistakes. Deep down, they may not believe they're worthy of good treatment or success.

Kids who have negative self-esteem may also:

- Feel frustrated, angry, anxious, or sad
- Lose interest in learning
- Have a hard time making and keeping friends
- Be more likely to be teased or bullied
- Become withdrawn or give in to peer pressure
- Develop self-defeating ways to deal with challenges, like quitting, avoidance, silliness, and denial
- Kids with negative self-esteem can also have a harder time standing up for themselves. In other words, they have trouble developing strong self-advocacy skills.

How to Help Your Child Build Positive Self-Esteem

Building self-esteem is possible. Kids can learn to improve how they see and value themselves. Being a supportive, realistic—but not overprotective—parent or caregiver is key. Asking teachers to be supportive but realistic is important, too.

It's important to praise kids in ways that build self-esteem and teach them to be proud of their efforts and accomplishments. Praise kids' efforts, but don't lavish praise on *everything* they do. Kids know when they've been successful and worked hard—and when they haven't.

Friendship is a big part of building positive self-esteem, too. That doesn't mean kids have to have tons of friends or be popular. Just having one friend who accepts you for who you are can make all the difference. Read about how to help grade-schoolers and middle-schoolers connect with other kids. And hear from an expert on what to do if your child doesn't seem to "fit in."

Help your child discover strengths to build on. You can even help your child set a "competence anchor" to build self-esteem. A competence anchor helps kids trigger a memory of something they did well in the past. That allows them to tap into joy and confidence and take that feeling with them as they tackle challenges.

Key Takeaways

- Positive self-esteem gives kids confidence to face challenges.
- Kids who value themselves are more likely to ask for the help they need.
- Being supportive but realistic is key to helping your child build positive self-esteem.

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