

How can I help my child build self-esteem?

SickKids Centre for Community Mental Health has worked with lots of families who are interested in helping their children build healthy self-esteem. Many families who have worked with staff at SickKids CCMH have found these suggestions helpful. Keep in mind your child's age and abilities when applying these strategies. Give them a try and feel free to add your own!

Validate your child's feelings. One of the things that can help your child feel better about themselves is knowing that their experience is understood and accepted. Listening to and respecting your child's feelings will give them the sense that what they are feeling, and ultimately who they are, is acceptable and understood by their caregivers.

- Actively listen to your child and reflect their feelings back to them. For example, try using statements like "It makes sense that you're feeling angry" or "I understand that you're having a tough time right now." Labelling your child's feelings for them will help them feel heard and understood.
- Let them know that what they feel is normal. When your child is having a tough time, you may want to jump into problem-solving mode, but taking the time to just sit with those uncomfortable feelings with your child, will help them feel accepted. Feeling accepted for our more challenging feelings is one of the building blocks of good self-esteem.
- Your child may like to hear that you had a similar experience when you were their age. If it feels comfortable and safe for you to share, this may help them feel understood.

Help your child develop a "Growth Mindset." A big part of improving your child's self-esteem is trying to help them adjust their mindset. Often, children believe that they're either "smart" or "dumb" or "good" or "bad" at something. But when your child can adjust their thinking, they can learn to approach situations knowing that anybody can be successful at something if they work hard enough. This idea that abilities and intelligence can be developed instead of being fixed, is called a "Growth Mindset." Try out these tips to help your child develop a Growth Mindset.



- Recognize effort over success. Instead of focusing on when your child wins a game or gets an A, focus on when they've put effort into what they're doing. Knowing that you value when they try their hardest will encourage your child to keep challenging themselves.
- Help your child learn that their brain works like a muscle which needs exercise to grow. They can grow and strengthen their brain muscle through hard work and practice.
- Embrace your child's mistakes and encourage them to do the same. Your child might be upset when they fail or mess-up. Let your child know that failures can be painful and it's okay to be upset. Validating their feelings and then discussing how failures are important learning opportunities, will help them to see their mistakes in a more positive light. Each mistake is an opportunity to grow.
- Check out this link for more information on a Growth Mindset: <https://bit.ly/2hjXl5c>

Give your child encouragement. This is one of the most important ways to increase your child's self-esteem. Try out these tips to ensure you're giving the most effective encouragement possible.

- Focus on your child's strengths. For example, if your child is having a tough time with math, you could point out how hard you see them trying or how well they are sitting and concentrating. While you can't say something is great when it's not, focusing on praising their effort will help them feel more confident in their abilities.
- Reinforce your child's positive behaviours with specifics. For example, "You did a great job of picking up your toys and putting them away neatly," rather than, "Good job!"
- Encouragement doesn't always have to be verbal. Giving your child a hug or a pat on the back also tells your child that you support them and appreciate their effort. Try kneeling down to your child's eye level to really connect with them when you give them feedback.

Optimize your child's environment. Your child's environment can be a powerful tool in helping them build their self-esteem. Without being controlling, you can guide your child towards situations where they are more likely to succeed and help support them when they encounter challenges. Try out these tips to optimize your child's environment.

- Set aside time daily or every few days to spend individually with your child. Although this might not be possible everyday, try your best to ensure that your child knows that you think they're worth your devoted attention. Try making this time screen-free to really connect with your child.
- Give your child responsibilities that are within their ability level. These can be simple chores like setting the table or taking out the garbage. Your child will feel a sense of accomplishment when they can complete these tasks successfully and independently.
- Ask your child to teach you a skill that they have learned or join in on an activity of their choice. This will help demonstrate that you value their activities and admire their accomplishments.
- Try to guide your child towards experiences that they are likely to meet with success. For example, if your child is a fast runner, try enrolling them in soccer or track and field. For children who may not feel successful in school, it's valuable to give them a different place where they can succeed.



Further resources

Check out these links for more tips on helping your child build their self-esteem.

1. Caring for Kids: How to Foster Your Child's Self-esteem <https://bit.ly/2wJeE4Z>
 2. Kids Health: Developing Your Child's Self-esteem <https://bit.ly/2NwEwwH>
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