

# Ten Ways to Build Your Child's Self-Esteem

Nurturing your preschooler's self-esteem may seem like a hefty responsibility. After all, a feeling of self-worth lays the foundation for your preschooler's future as he sets out to try new things on his own. "Self-esteem comes from having a sense of belonging, believing that we're capable, and knowing our contributions are valued and worthwhile," says California family therapist Jane Nelsen, co-author of the Positive Discipline series.

"As any parent knows, self-esteem is a fleeting experience," says Nelsen. "Sometimes we feel good about ourselves and sometimes we don't. What we're really trying to teach our kids are life skills like resiliency." Your goal as a parent is to ensure that your child develops pride and self-respect -- in himself and in his cultural roots -- as well as faith in his ability to handle life's challenges (for a preschooler that may mean copying capital letters accurately). Here are ten simple strategies to help boost your child's self-esteem:

**Give unconditional love.** A child's self-esteem flourishes with the kind of no-strings-attached devotion that says, "I love you, no matter who you are or what you do." Your child benefits the most when you accept him for who he is regardless of his strengths, difficulties, temperament, or abilities. So lavish him with love. Give him plenty of cuddles, kisses, and pats on the shoulder. And don't forget to tell him how much you love him. When you do have to correct your child, make it clear that it's his behavior -- not him -- that's unacceptable. For instance, instead of saying, "You're a naughty boy! Why can't you be good?" say, "Pushing Gabriel isn't nice. It can hurt. Please don't push."

**Pay attention.** Carve out time to give your preschooler your undivided attention. That does wonders for your child's self-worth because it sends the message that you think he's important and valuable. It doesn't have to take a lot of time; it just means taking a moment to stop flicking through the mail if he's trying to talk with you or turning off the TV long enough to answer a question. Make eye contact so it's clear that you're really listening to what he's saying. When you're strapped for time, let your child know it without ignoring his needs. Say, "Tell me all about the picture you drew, and then when you're finished, I'll need to make our dinner."

**Teach limits.** Establish a few reasonable rules for your preschooler. For instance, if you tell your child he has to eat his snack in the kitchen, don't let him wander around the family room with his crackers and fruit the next day. Or if you tell him to put his dirty clothes in the laundry basket, don't say it's okay to pile them on the floor. Knowing that certain family rules are set in stone will help him feel more secure. It may take constant repetition on your part, but he'll start to live by your expectations soon enough. Just be clear and consistent and show him that you trust him to do the right thing.

**Support healthy risks.** Encourage your child to explore something new, such as trying a different food, finding a best pal, or riding a bike. Though there's always the possibility of failure, without risk there's little opportunity for success. So let your child safely experiment, and resist the urge to intervene. For instance, try not to "rescue" him if he's showing mild frustration at figuring out a new toy. Even jumping in to say, "I'll do it" can foster dependence and diminish your child's confidence. You'll build his self-esteem by balancing your need to protect him with his need to tackle new tasks.

**Let mistakes happen.** The flip side, of course, of having choices and taking risks is that sometimes your child is bound to make mistakes. These are valuable lessons for your child's confidence. So if your child puts his plate too close to the edge of the table and it tips, encourage him to think about

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what he might do differently next time. That way his self-esteem won't sag and he'll understand that it's okay to make mistakes sometimes. When you goof up yourself, admit it, says Daniel Meier, assistant professor of elementary education at San Francisco State University. Acknowledging and recovering from your mistakes sends a powerful message to your child -- it makes it easier for your child to accept his own shortcomings.

**Celebrate the positive.** Everyone responds well to encouragement, so make an effort to acknowledge the good things your child does every day within his earshot. For instance, tell his dad, "Joshua washed all the vegetables for dinner." He'll get to bask in the glow of your praise and his dad's heartening response. And be specific. Instead of saying "Good job," say, "Thank you for waiting so patiently in line." This will enhance his sense of accomplishment and self-worth and let him know exactly what he did right.

**Listen well.** If your child needs to talk, stop and listen to what he has to say. He needs to know that his thoughts, feelings, desires, and opinions matter. Help him get comfortable with his emotions by labeling them. Say, "I understand you're sad because you have to say bye to your school pals." By accepting his emotions without judgment, you validate his feelings and show that you value what he has to say. If you share your own feelings ("I'm excited about going to the zoo"), he'll gain confidence expressing his own.

**Resist comparisons.** Comments such as "Why can't you be more like your sister?" or "Why can't you be nice like Peter?" will just remind your child of where he struggles in a way that fosters shame, envy, and competition. Even positive comparisons, such as "You're the best player" are potentially damaging because a child can find it hard to live up to this image. If you let your child know you appreciate him for the unique individual he is, he'll be more likely to value himself too.

**Offer empathy.** If your child compares himself unfavorably to his siblings or peers ("Why can't I catch a ball like Sophia?"), show him empathy and then emphasize one of his strengths. For instance, say, "You're right. Sophia is good at catching. And you're good at painting pictures." This can help your child learn that we all have strengths and weaknesses, and that he doesn't have to be perfect to feel good about himself.

**Provide encouragement.** Every child needs the kind of support from loved ones that signals, "I believe in you. I see your effort. Keep going!" Encouragement means acknowledging progress -- not just rewarding achievement. So if your preschooler is struggling to fasten his snaps, say, "You're trying very hard and you almost have it!" instead of "Not like that. Let me do it."

There's a difference between praise and encouragement. One rewards the task while the other rewards the person ("You did it!" rather than "I'm proud of you!"). Praise can make a child feel that he's only "good" if he does something perfectly. Encouragement, on the other hand, acknowledges the effort. "Tell me about your drawing. I see that you like purple" is more helpful than saying, "That's the most beautiful picture I've ever seen." Too much praise can sap self-esteem because it can create pressure to perform and set up a continual need for approval from others. So dole out the praise judiciously and offer encouragement liberally; it will your child grow up to feel good about himself.