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# How to build a child's self-esteem. Hint: It doesn't involve praise.

Instead of giving compliments, help your child develop the skills to complete challenges on their own, and let competence breed confidence.

By Heidi Lynn Borst

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Rays of pride beamed from my 7-year-old's cherubic face as he held his drawing up for my assessment. "Ten out of ten?" he asked. Though I wanted to be honest (this artwork was far from his best attempt), my fear of triggering his harsh inner critic took over, and I nodded in approval.

When providing feedback that might bruise my son's self-esteem, I'm ultra careful. A borderline perfectionist, he's hard on himself and extremely sensitive to criticism. Still, I worried whether praising my son for a subpar effort was the right move. It felt good in the moment, but experts say that loading kids with validation, a common parenting perspective in the '90s, does more harm than good in the long run.

Kids with low self-esteem constantly worry *Am I good enough?*, but parents who regularly check in and show affection help buffer against the negative outcomes of low self-esteem, says Amy Brausch, a professor of psychology at Western Kentucky University. A 2014 study Brausch co-authored found that close parental relationships help moderate worrisome risk factors such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

As parents, it's painful to watch our children struggle. At the first sign of trouble, we want to jump in and fix things. But experts say we should fight that urge. Instead, parents should promote their child's self-efficacy, defined as the ability to complete a task or challenge using the appropriate strategies on one's own. Actively bolstering kids' competence is much more beneficial than swooping in to save the day. Sugarcoated feedback like I gave my son might protect a child's feelings, but it won't help them improve.

So what can parents do to increase their children's self-efficacy? I spoke with experts to get their advice:

**Identify specific improvements.** It's not enough to simply tell kids to try harder. "If kids are learning to draw, they need to learn perspective. If they're learning to play baseball, they need to learn the correct way to hold the bat," says Eileen Kennedy-Moore, a Princeton, N.J., clinical psychologist and author of "Kid Confidence: Help Your Child Make Friends, Build Resilience, and Develop Real Self-Esteem." "Lavish praise doesn't help, because if I'm already wonderful, why would I try hard or practice? Competence means not only developing skills, but also embracing the learning process."

She advises parents to give specific suggestions about what kids can do to achieve a goal in attainable steps: "Effort without strategy is demoralizing. When a kid has had many experiences of failure, why in the world would they believe that if they struggle now, it will pay off?"

Based on this approach, I reassessed my son's drawing. Noticing he'd rushed through the areas of Godzilla's body that required more attention to detail, I found an online tutorial for him to watch. Observing carefully, he followed the steps, slow and purposeful in this second attempt. His hard work paid off, and the result was an effort he was proud of.

**Let kids problem-solve on their own.** Parents should give kids the freedom to figure things out for themselves, serving as gentle guides rather than running the show. "It's a fool's errand to think that we can protect our children from the world," says Ned Johnson, president and founder of test-preparation and tutoring company Prep Matters and co-author of "The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives." "If your kid has the sense that if something bad happens, Mom is going to fall out of the ceiling like Tom Cruise in 'Mission: Impossible' and extricate them, that's [problematic]. What we want to do is teach them the skills to be able to protect themselves, and if they're not able to protect themselves, how do they look for help?"

Real competence results from repeated experience coping with tolerable stressors and uncomfortable feelings on our own, Johnson says. “You can have a wall full of trophies from ‘Most Improved’ to ‘Trier,’ but real self-esteem has an internal locus of control, not an external one,” he says. “I don’t have to be saved by superheroes. I get to be the epic hero of my own life. Kids cannot have real self-esteem without feeling like they are capable and able to handle things on their own.”

Before lending a hand, consider whether your child is capable of accomplishing some or all of a task solo, says Giacomo Bono, associate professor of psychology at California State University at Dominguez Hills and co-author of “[Making Grateful Kids: The Science of Building Character](#).” “Help them only enough so they can get it done, but not more than that,” he suggests, adding: “Don’t attempt something so challenging that you can’t help them achieve it, because it could backfire, and maybe they’ll give up on the sport or the hobby or whatever it is.”

**Express unconditional love.** True self-esteem is rooted in unconditional love, not undeserved praise, Johnson says: “There’s a difference between thinking that every picture you make is a masterpiece, or every note you play on the piano is inspired genius, as opposed to innately knowing, *I’m loved*.”

Unconditional regard fills our kids with the confidence to believe in their ability to succeed on their own, bolstering their self-esteem, Bono adds. “When you have conditions, it exerts control on the child,” he says. “It is important for a child to believe that you value them no matter what. No matter what happens now, if you fail, that doesn’t determine how I value you, and I believe you have something important to contribute.”

Tell your kids exactly what you love about them that doesn’t have to be earned, Kennedy-Moore says: “The greatest compliment we can give our kids is to say, ‘I really enjoy your company.’ It’s really important for kids to learn that love doesn’t have to be earned — the alternative is to be on a treadmill of constantly having to prove their worth.”

Letting your kids see the real you, flaws and all, will help them accept themselves and their own imperfections. “You don’t want your kids to see you as this perfect person that doesn’t make mistakes,” Brausch says. “Give examples of a difficulty or challenge you had and how you found your way through it. Modeling that everybody makes mistakes and learns from them is really helpful.”

The next time my son says, "Isn't this drawing the best?" I'll be sure to tell him how much I love his passion for art, offering feedback if I see room for improvement along with ideas for making it better. I believe in him, no matter what, but I want him to learn to believe in himself, too.

*Heidi Lynn Borst is a journalist who writes about parenting and mental health.*

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