



## Confidence

It's a questions most parents have wondered. In a world of change and unpredictability, mean girls, playground politics, and put-downs, how do we instil confidence in our children? **Confidence** stems from **competence**. Children gain confidence through experiencing their own competence, and it's through confidence that children are able to navigate life successfully and safely. Life is full of choices, and choices are full of risks. Without solid confidence, children won't be prepared to take those risks. If they have an unrealistic, hollow sense of confidence, they may take chances recklessly. But with authentic confidence, earned by demonstrating competence, they'll learn they have some power over their environments. They're more likely to persevere, and have an optimistic outlook. Confidence earned during childhood and adolescence is a springboard toward success in adult life.

When my daughter learnt to ride her bike it took time and persistence. She took some falls. Rather than simply trying to cheer up a child whenever they experience failure or disappointment, we need to focus on resilience. We all have failures, but resilient people learn from every failure. They learn how to do better next time. They are persistent. They use the negative outcomes, and emotions, to motivate them to do better next time.

So what might this look like in practice? When my daughter fell off her bike, after checking calmly that she wasn't badly hurt, we might say something like, "Well, this was your first time without training wheels. See how far you managed to go without falling off? How do you feel? I know it's a bummer that you fell. Ready to try again? Let's see how far you can go this time. I like the way that you keep trying, even when things are hard." These responses don't deny the failure, or the feelings. They reflect on what happened, acknowledge the disappointment, and show pride over the child's efforts.

When a child knows that they've mastered a task, they can believe in their ability and be truly confident. Adults can nurture confidence by teaching problem-solving skills and providing safe opportunities to use and practice those skills.

Confidence needs support and reinforcement. We can do this in three basic ways – catch them being good, offer genuine praise, and set reasonable expectations.

We are often better at catching younger children at being good, but older children need our attention and approval too. It's important to continue reinforcing their good behaviours, kind gestures and unprompted acts of kindness by offering words of appreciation and praise.

The best way to praise a child is in showing that we notice and appreciate what they have done – "You really make me happy when you help get dinner without my having to ask you first". Our praise needs to be genuine, not excessive – it ceases to have meaning if everything they do is praised. And excessive praise can make the child feel like we think they're perfect, an impossible position to keep up.

Children live up or down to our expectations. As children's competence and confidence grow, we need to continue to hold up high expectations to keep them moving forward. These expectations must be realistic. Each child is an individual with unique abilities and temperament. Not every child is capable of achieving everything. Our challenge as parents is to monitor children's response to achievements and failures, and to understand their capabilities. Most importantly, we need to react supportively when our children do come up short. It's crucial that children know that we all fail, we can recover, and that the people who are successful are those who try again.

*Written by Kathy Stirrup*