

Encouraging Competence

What would you do?

Your 3-year-old daughter is trying to dress herself. She gets her shirt and jeans on fine, but puts her socks on inside out. Will she be more likely to get them right next time if you say,

"Oh, Nancy, you put your socks on wrong again. Why can't you remember that the fuzzy part goes on the inside?"

or "Good! You got your shirt and jeans on right. Why don't you just change your socks so the fuzzy part is inside?"



The best response, of course, is the second one, because it emphasizes that Nancy did a good job and is more likely to make her feel confident. When children have faith in themselves, they do better. They are eager to try new and harder things. Through these new experiences, they gain new skills and become even more confident and capable.

Self-confidence leads to success.

When, on the other hand, children think they can't do anything right, they are afraid to try new things. They expect to fail. By avoiding new challenges, they never learn that they can do things. Their confidence never gets a chance to develop.

Self-doubt results in failure.

Competence is learned

To a large extent, then, we become what we think we are:

Those who think they can do, do.

Those who think they cannot, do not.

This is true for all of us. But it is especially true for young children. The responses of parents and other adults have a powerful effect on children's actions. Their reactions actually teach children how competent—or incompetent—they are.

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Have you noticed how proud your children are of their accomplishments? They will urge you to "Watch this!" or "Look at what I made!" Young children want to be seen as capable and strong, but they lack the skills and knowledge that grownups have. The list of things they can do is much shorter than the list of things they can't do. They really need your help in learning that they can do things.

In praise of praise

To many parents, "common sense" says, "If I want my children to become capable, I must be sure to point out and correct all their mistakes." But constant criticism only teaches children that they can't do things very well.

When, however, parents emphasize what their children do right, they help children feel good about themselves. By letting children know how it feels to succeed, parents encourage children to keep trying.

To competence through confidence

Of course, no parent can, or would want to, keep children from every possibility of failing. Children learn from failure as well as from success. Children who have learned that they are capable can accept their mistakes and weaknesses. They know that overall they are competent.

H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

To help your children develop confidence in themselves, try to:

- Focus on your children's strengths and successes.
- Show them you have faith in their abilities.
- Provide them with experiences for success.

In these ways, you can teach your children that "I can do it!"

Ways to increase competence



As the old saying goes, "Nothing teaches like success." To let your children enjoy the sweet taste of success, set up an environment where initiative is more likely to lead to success than to failure:

- Dress your children in sturdy clothes that are easy to put on.
- Provide stepstools and low hooks so they can do things for themselves.
- Buy plastic dishes and glasses to prevent accidents.
- Offer them a wide range of physical, mental, and social experiences.

Self-confidence has a ripple effect. When children feel capable in one area, the feeling is likely to spread to other areas of their lives. There are many areas in which young children can become competent. Here are just a few.

Arts and crafts. Even young children can master the basics of popular arts and crafts like sewing; wood-working; weaving; sculpturing in clay, soap, or papier mache; paper cutting and folding; jewelry making; painting; and making musical instruments. Save materials you usually throw out, like boxes and cardboard cylinders, to see how your children can put these materials to creative use.

Camping. You can camp right in your own backyard or at a nearby park or beach. Assign children simple tasks like unpacking, collecting wood, helping put up the tent, and cooking. There will be opportunities to practice and pick up lots of new skills, such as zipping and unzipping, making knots, fishing, reading a compass, and crabbing. The satisfaction of working together toward a common goal is one they won't soon forget.

Contributing to the household. Children feel good about themselves when they can help run the household. From an early age, they can take on responsibility for simple tasks like picking up the newspaper, putting away groceries, folding laundry, emptying baskets, raking leaves, and sweeping the floor. Older children feel especially proud when they can help you with younger siblings, doing things like holding the baby's bottle, making simple toys for the baby, or telling a story to a younger brother or sister.

Gardening. To children there are few things more fun than digging in the dirt. Planting seeds and watching them grow and produce is a source of wonder and joy to children. They don't need a lot of space. A window box or a few flowerpots will hold some beans, tomatoes, herbs, flowers, and radishes.

Body movement and expression. Self-confidence grows with physical strength and coordination. Give your children lots of space, materials, and opportunities for free physical movement. In addition, there are many special experiences you may want to introduce them to, like dancing, acting, playing an instrument, singing, and swimming.

Cooking. Food is important to children, and knowing how to prepare it gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment. You may be surprised at how many things children can do in the kitchen. If you help them observe basic safety rules, they can cut, grind, grate, beat, stir, mash, peel, wash, squeeze, strain, measure, and pour. They can help you shop and plan menus and follow simple recipes. In the process, they develop their small muscles and learn about foods, words, numbers, time, safety, and following directions.

Observing holidays. Children need not be passive observers of holidays. They can become part of family traditions by helping you plan and prepare for celebrations. They can help you select the Thanksgiving turkey and Christmas tree, make Halloween costumes and Valentine's Day cards, dye Easter eggs or make matzo for Passover. Many holidays, like Martin Luther King's birthday and St. Patrick's Day, are good times to talk about history, folklore, and the meaning behind holiday observance.

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