

Confidence

Why is confidence important?

Confidence helps us deal with the challenges in life. If we are confident, we believe in our abilities and feel hopeful that we can achieve our goals. We are also more willing to try new things, and this helps us to learn. Having confidence also means we are more likely to feel comfortable with ourselves and that we have something worthwhile to give.

Confidence helps us interact with other people, which makes it easier for us to form relationships. We live in a social world, so our relationships with others are of considerable importance to our wellbeing. Confidence is an essential part of building relationships - the more confident we are, the stronger, healthier relationships we will be able to build with others.

Our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.

Nel Noddings

When parents are asked what they want for their children, they often say they want them to feel confident. Confidence is an important part of the new Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (see Education Scotland) - teachers are being asked to enable all young people to become 'confident individuals'. Feeling confident about yourself is one of the things that leads to a flourishing life.

What is a confident child?

Confidence means slightly different things to different people. Here we are talking about a child who:

- believes in their own ability to do things
- has a genuine sense of their own worth
- takes responsibility for their actions
- feels optimistic about life.

Some children may seem naturally more confident than others, but confidence isn't fixed. It can grow and develop. And if it does, children are more likely to have fulfilling lives.

Confidence is not about how we behave on the outside – it is about our inner feelings of self-belief. One confident child may be very popular, willing to speak up in class or even act on stage. Another confident child may sit quietly in class and have a couple of close friends. So, two confident children may appear very different. But they are both able and willing to learn new things. Both will try hard because they will be optimistic about what they can do.

As an adult who lives with or works with children, you have an important role to play in encouraging confidence in them. You can help children develop the four components of confidence listed above by how you act and what you say.

Did you know?



Confidence is contagious! Research has shown that teachers with high confidence in their teaching ability create confident pupils. Parents who have confidence in their ability as a parent improve their children's self-beliefs and capabilities.

Pajares, F. (2005) Self-efficacy during childhood and adolescence. Implications for teachers and parents. In: Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents. Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.

Components of confidence

Belief in your own ability to do things

A child's belief in their own ability to do things is important for their motivation, perseverance and success in life.

Self-belief (sometimes referred to as self-efficacy) can motivate a child more than their actual skill level. So a child who truly believes they can pass a test or ride a bike or write a poem may be more likely to achieve it than another child who has better ability, but who doesn't believe they can do it.

Whether you think you can or think you can't - you are right.

Henry Ford

Having a strong belief that you can do something will help you to try harder and to keep trying even when you find it difficult. For example, a child who has a realistic belief that they are a good footballer will keep trying even when they don't make the team. An author who has a realistic belief that their book is good will cope with rejection and will keep trying to get it published.

And the more things a child believes they can do, the more likely they are to generalise that self-belief to other areas of their lives. So they begin to believe they have the ability to try, persevere and succeed in a whole range of activities.

A genuine sense of self-worth

Self-worth is about being aware of, and valuing, your true self. It is not about how others see you or how you think others see you. It is not based on what you achieve. It is not about the kind of person you think others expect you to be. It is about who you are deep inside and your belief that you have a value to other people and to the community around you. When a child has a genuine sense of self-worth, they are aware of their own unique being and their unique place in the world. They know who they are and they know that they're ok, even when things aren't going so well for them.

Self-worth is different from self-esteem. Self-esteem generally means how you feel about yourself in comparison to others, which can fluctuate depending on your mood and whether you are currently achieving or failing. So self-esteem is like a spotlight being turned on you – when things are going well you feel great, but when things aren't going so well, you can feel down on yourself or even depressed. Self-worth is more like an inner light that shines from you, out into the world.

If a child feels this sense of self-worth, they are less likely to give up when they fail. They are also less likely to get depressed when something bad happens to them, like when a relationship with a friend breaks down. If you are a parent, giving unconditional love to your children will help them develop this sense of self-worth.

Be who you are, not someone else.

Caitlin Robb, 11 years

Taking responsibility for your actions

This is not just about taking the blame for your wrong-doings. It is a lot more than that. It is about believing that you are in control of your own life. It is about believing that when something happens to you, you are able to choose how you respond. People who take responsibility for their actions don't believe that chance or luck or other people control what happens to them. They are proactive rather than reactive. This means that they think about how to respond or act in a situation, rather than just reacting to things as if there's nothing they can do. They say things like "I choose", "I prefer", or "I will" rather than "I can't", "I must" or "if only".

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances.

George Bernard Shaw

Case study



Victor Frankl was a survivor of a World War II concentration camp. When he was in the camp, he became very aware that, even though he was treated worse than an animal and had no freedom as we generally understand it, he was still free to choose how to respond to his situation and to the guards who were doing this to him. The guards could not take away that ultimate freedom. This awareness helped him to survive. Even though the guards tried, they couldn't take away his human dignity because he was still responsible for his own actions.

This attitude of responsibility is the basis of becoming independent. Babies and young children are very dependent on the adults around them to take responsibility for them. However, as soon as a child is able to take some responsibility for their behaviour and their choices, they should be encouraged to do so. This is an important component of confidence and, ultimately, of a fulfilling and happy life.

Being optimistic about life

Confidence requires an optimistic outlook on life. Being optimistic is looking on the bright side or 'seeing the glass as half-full' as opposed to 'half-empty'. An optimistic outlook is about expecting things to be well and to go well for you. So when things go wrong, you will brush it off as unimportant and will tell yourself it was due to something specific and it won't have a long-lasting effect. For example: "I didn't pass the exam because I didn't study hard enough for that one – I'll be able to pass it next time."

As a comparison, being pessimistic is 'seeing the glass as half-empty'. It means expecting things not to be well or to go well for you. So when something goes wrong, this adds more evidence to your dim view of the world. For example: "I knew I wouldn't pass that exam because I am stupid and am useless at exams."

You may have a tendency to be more optimistic or more pessimistic. But these attitudes are not fixed and you can become more optimistic by arguing with yourself about why things happened to you. You can also help children and young people to become more optimistic.

How to help children to be more confident

Adults face the critical challenge of making the positive self-beliefs of youngsters automatic and habitual as early as possible. After all, good habits are as hard to break as are bad habits.

Frank Pajares

Improving children's beliefs in their own ability to do things

- View children and young people as capable and let them know it. Children are likely to become the sort of people they believe others believe them to be.
- Be careful not to say things like "you're really not musical" or "you can't do maths" or "you can't spell" or "you're not sporty at all." You really don't know how a child will develop, but saying these things can dramatically affect a child's self-belief and therefore may affect their motivation to try. It could have a much longer-lasting influence on a child than you might expect. For example, many adults won't attempt sports because of a teacher's or parent's fleeting comment about their not being sporty when they were young.
- Remember that what you say, either positive or negative, can have a long-lasting effect on the children you work with and live with. Children will listen and believe you.

Careful the things you say. Children will listen.

Stephen Sondheim

- Set tasks that are challenging for a young person's skills level. Help them find tasks that are just difficult enough to inspire and satisfy them but not so difficult that they become anxious.
- To make tasks more manageable, help children break them up into lots of little steps. Give feedback on each step, and praise them for their effort and persistence.
- When children need help, you should try to give it. But try not to provide the solution. Instead, give the child support to find the solution themselves. So you could point them to a website that might help them or ask them a question to help them think about their problem in a different way. Coming up with the solution on their own will help improve their confidence.
- Encourage children to improve on their own standards, not to compare themselves to others. Do this by pointing out the improvements a child has made on previous work. Don't point out how much better or worse their work is than someone else's.
- Praise a child for doing something well. This is an important way of showing encouragement and support.

- Be honest with your praise. Telling a child they have done well when they haven't will not improve their confidence. They simply won't believe you and they may be confused by your dishonesty.
- Tell children how proud you are that they are working so hard at dancing, writing, swimming, etc, and that you really enjoy seeing them perform, reading their stories or watching them swim. You could also tell them how glad you are that they enjoy what they are doing so much. This will help them persevere in developing skills that truly give them pleasure.

When they were small you clapped when they sang. Don't ever stop.

Rob Parsons

- Show a child that you believe in their ability to achieve something, rather than make statements which may suggest to them they have already achieved it. This means that you should avoid telling a child they are 'really clever' or that they are a 'brilliant' footballer or writer or painter, etc. This may make them think that they don't need to try because they are going to do well anyway. Or it may make them feel under pressure to prove themselves to you.
- Take time to show genuine interest in what they are doing. Show you are interested in them and their work. Ask them questions about what they are doing. Giving attention to a child on a one-to-one basis can be a powerful way of improving a child's confidence. Perhaps you can remember a personal comment from a teacher or a parent that left a lasting impression on your life?
- Be positive about failure! Help children to see the value of mistakes and failure, and that they are steps to success. Mistakes and failure are completely normal, and are important opportunities for learning - they can be used to help us find other ways to achieve our goals. Show this yourself by admitting your own errors in a good-natured way, for example, "Oh, yes you're right, I was a bit careless there - I won't do that again!"

Don't be afraid to fail. Don't waste energy trying to cover up failure. Learn from your failures and go on to the next challenge. It's OK. If you're not failing, you're not growing.

H. Stanley Judd

Did you know?



Thomas Edison made 1000 unsuccessful attempts at inventing the light bulb. When a reporter asked, "How did it feel to fail 1000 times?" Edison replied, "I didn't fail 1000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1000 steps."

- Make sure any criticism is constructive. Describe the behaviour, not the person. So, instead of telling a child that they are 'lazy', say that they're not putting in enough effort and that they need to work a bit harder. Be specific about the changes you want them to make if they have made a mistake.
- Be very careful about using the words 'always' and 'never', for example "You're *always* late" or "You *never* get your work in on time." Are these statements really true? If not, you are just encouraging pessimistic thinking.

- When a child has difficulty with a subject at school, such as spelling, parents should be careful about well-meaning statements such as "oh don't feel bad, it runs in the family, I couldn't spell to save my life." The child may give up because she thinks there's no chance they can improve. She may even think it's admirable to be poor at spelling. Instead, a parent could say "It would be great if you could improve at spelling so that you can help me to spell better."
- Help a child who doubts their obvious abilities, for example maths or dancing, by continually reminding them of their successes in that area. Abilities aren't much use if you don't believe you have them. Inaccurate self-beliefs can mean that young people don't achieve as much as they could, personally, socially and academically.
- Believe in a child's potential. Self-beliefs that go slightly beyond what a child can actually achieve are the most likely to help them try hard and persevere. So avoid judging how much a child is capable of achieving in a particular field. People surprise us all the time – we can never be completely aware of anyone's full potential.

Did you know?



As people evaluate their lives, they are more likely to regret challenges they did not confront, risks they didn't take and contests they didn't enter as a result of under-confidence and self-doubt. They are less likely to regret actions taken as a result of over-confidence and optimism (or even foolishness).

Pajares, F. (2005). Self-efficacy during childhood and adolescence. Implications for teachers and parents. In: Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents. Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.

Improving children's sense of self-worth

- If you are a parent, give unconditional love to your child to develop their sense of self-worth. This means loving them for who they *are*, not what they do, how they behave, what they achieve or what they look like. It is important that you *show* unconditional love - it's not enough just to feel it. A child needs to see that you will always love them, accept them and look after them. They need to see that you will always do this, even, for example, when they don't behave well or when they fail a test. It is also important that you show them that you enjoy spending time with them.
- Try to help children develop a sense of self-worth by encouraging them to be more mindful of what they can do for others as opposed to what other people think of them. Teach them that they may feel better if they turn the spotlight off from themselves and turn their inner light out to the world around them.

Improving children's sense of responsibility for their actions

- Support older children to plan and organise their schoolwork effectively, but give them the responsibility of getting it done. Make sure they have a quiet space with no distractions where they can work. Try to avoid telling them what to do and when to do it as this will not help improve their sense of responsibility.
- Encourage children to think before they act and to pause before reacting. The best way to teach them how to do this is to do it yourself. So when something happens that makes you angry or upset, pause and take a few breaths before you respond. Make a conscious choice about how you want to respond in this situation. For example, you don't have to let a bad day at work spoil your evening. You can choose not to let it affect you.

- Use proactive language yourself to help children learn to be proactive. This will show them how to take responsibility for their lives. Say things like: "I choose", "I prefer", "I can do better than that" instead of things like: "I can't", "I must" or "that's just the way I am."
- Teach children to take the initiative to make things happen instead of waiting for them to happen.

It isn't sufficient just to want - you've got to ask yourself
what you are going to do to get the things you want

Richard D. Rosen

- Teach children to be proactive by helping them to think about solutions and options instead of problems and barriers.
- Encourage children to take responsibility for themselves as early as possible. For example, provide toddlers and very young children with equipment they can handle by themselves, like low coat hooks, plastic drink tumblers, etc. Children develop feelings of competence when they can care for their own needs.
- Expect older children to help out at school or in the home. They can help with preparing meals or cleaning and tidying up. This will help them to feel they are contributing as well as developing skills for use as they get older. Show your appreciation by telling them how much they have helped you or saved you some time. Avoid rewarding with pocket money or treats as they need to learn to take personal responsibility for their own self-care and for the care of the family.

Improving children's optimism

See the How to help a child develop optimism section for further information.

Activity

Here's an activity you can try to help build children's confidence:

Growing Confidence Trees



Our confidence grows over time, like a strong tree. Here's an activity to explore with a child or children, some of the things they can do that will help their confidence grow even stronger.

What you need:

- Sheets of thin white card or strong white paper – A3 paper size or bigger
- Large sheets of brown paper or card
- Different shades of green paper
- Different shades of red paper
- Apple and leaf templates – draw simple shapes on card and cut them out to use as templates
- Pencils
- Felt-tipped pens
- Glue sticks

- Scissors.

What you do:

- Draw a large tree-shape on the brown paper. Include the wiggly roots, strong trunk and spreading branches. Find a picture of a tree if you need some help with the shape.
- Cut out the tree and stick it onto the white paper or card.
- Label the large sheet of white paper or card as your confidence tree, eg. 'Anna's Confidence Tree' but write your name instead of Anna's.
- Along the wiggly roots write the ways in which you're already growing in confidence, such as 'I can already smile at people I don't know.' 'I asked John to play football with me last week.' 'I helped Kiri when she dropped her books.'
- Along the trunk write 'My confidence is growing in...' and then write an area where you'd like your confidence to grow, such as making friends, speaking in public, running, playing the recorder, reading, etc.
- Then cut out lots of green leaf shapes. On some of the leaves write one thing you could do to help your confidence grow in your chosen area. These could be ideas like practising your recorder for a few minutes every day, saying something kind to someone else, asking someone to help you when you don't understand a word in your book, etc.
- Stick these leaves onto the left hand branches.
- On some of the leaves write things that other people could do to help you feel more confident, such as appreciating your efforts when you try and do the things you find hard, encouraging you when you feel like giving up, being understanding and helpful when you get stuck, or when you make mistakes, etc.
- Stick these leaves on the right hand branches.
- Stick some empty leaves on the tree too, so that you can add other ideas as you think of them, or as other people suggest them.
- Whenever you notice your confidence has grown, write what went well on a red apple shape and stick it onto your tree.
- Keep your tree safe and use it to encourage you as you grow in confidence.

Some things to talk about:

- What areas are you most confident in?
- How did you get to be so confident in this area?
- How can the ways your confidence grew in another area help you grow more confident in the area you wrote on your tree?
- How can you help other people to become more confident?
- What difference will it make to your life when your confidence has grown in the way you want it to grow?
- What (if anything) can you learn about growing in confidence from thinking about a tree?

Other ideas:

- If a tree doesn't suit your context, adapt the design to become a sky scraper or other tall building, and write on its bricks instead of the leaves, etc.