



for boosting confidence in kids

WRITTEN BY **Heidi Scrimgeour**

It can be heart-breaking to watch your child struggle with self-doubt, but it's surprisingly easy to find ways to boost their confidence. Try these for size...



Listen carefully

I have a terrible habit of rushing my children through quick exchanges rather than taking time for relaxed conversations, but slowing down to listen to your child can help them feel more confident about expressing themselves, which leads to greater confidence overall.

Charlie Jones is founder of London-based children's book community www.thebookclub.co.uk, a new website which helps parents develop their child's language through reading. He recommends asking your child what they did at school, and instead of accepting the usual 'Nothing' in reply, try asking them to have a go at teaching it to you. It's a fun and easy way to make your child feel special, which can be a confidence booster.

Distinguish behaviour from identity

Gretta Schifano (www.mumsdotravel.com) lives in Surrey with her husband, Sal, and their two children, aged 13 and nine. When it comes to discipline, Gretta's a big believer in being very careful with your words in order to avoid undermining self-esteem or confidence. "With both children, if ever I have to tell them off, I believe it's best to talk about the behaviour rather than the child," Gretta explains. "I try to avoid saying 'You are unkind' and instead say something like 'That wasn't a kind thing to say'."

Similarly, making the most of opportunities to give a child credit for kind or thoughtful behaviour is an effective way of helping them feel more confident.

Show them they're important

When so many elements of children's lives are organised for them, there can be few moments for them to feel important. But giving children opportunities to take up a position of responsibility - relevant to their age and capability, of course - is a good way to show



how much they matter. Showing a child that you trust them with important things can help them feel more confident and capable. "Encourage your child to read to a younger sibling or friend," suggests Charlie. "Even if they just manage to look at pictures together, it will make them feel very grown up and important."

Praise their strengths

Praise gets a bad press these days. I feel like we're forever being told that modern mums and dads praise their kids too much, but I'm convinced that a well-timed word of praise can do wonders for a child's self-belief. Gretta agrees: "I think it's important to find out what a child is good at, and then praise and nurture that skill or talent."

“ If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence ”

Value their interests

At bedtime, I find it's often tempting to select stories based on those I can bear to read for the hundredth time, but a gesture like letting your child choose which game to play or which books to read at bedtime can have a big impact on your child's confidence. Charlie Jones advises: "With primary aged children, spend time reading together - and let your child choose the book at least half of the time. This shows that you value their interests, which will boost their confidence."

Teach them to like themselves

Children's life coach Naomi Richards (www.thekidscoach.org.uk) believes that encouraging children to accept themselves is critical for building confidence. "A child needs to like and accept who they are, and recognise their attributes and what they can bring to other people and situations," she explains.

Gretta Schifano agrees, and thinks that minimising a child's difficulties and recognising their achievements can help. "I try to praise my son for doing his best rather than focusing on any problems, especially when he's struggling with homework," she says.

Allow mistakes

My seven-year-old son is a budding artist who sometimes struggles when his masterpieces don't quite go according to plan. When that happens, we like to dwell on a quote made famous by artist Peter Max: "Don't worry about mistakes. Making things out of mistakes - that's creativity."

Charlie Jones agrees that giving kids the freedom to make mistakes can be a huge confidence booster. "If a child makes a mistake while reading, try not to jump in too quickly to correct them," he advises. "They'll gain more confidence if they discover errors themselves, so instead try asking a question like 'did that sound right?'"

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Neil Sinclair (www.commandodad.com) is an ex-commando turned writer and stay-at-home Dad, who lives in Staffordshire with his wife Tara and their three children Sam (10), Jude (9) and Liberty (5). He thinks praising a child in public is an especially important part of boosting a child's confidence. "It's important to let children overhear you telling other people just how good they are. This seems to be especially effective when children hear you talking about them to your peers, not just to relatives who, on some level, they may expect to be impressed. It reinforces what you tell them, and there's something in human nature that loves to know you're spoken of fondly - just think how chuffed you'd be if you overheard a colleague saying something great about you."



Expect the unexpected

It's worth bearing in mind that confidence-boosters sometimes come in unexpected ways. For Gretta's nine-year-old son, discovering that he had dyslexia had a positive impact on his confidence. "I was worried about how he'd take the news," Gretta explains. "But he was thrilled when I told him. He actually punched the air, and said he might grow up to be someone amazing like Einstein. He's been telling everyone he's dyslexic and has decided he's going to write a book. I've been thinking over his unexpected reaction, and have come to the conclusion that he's pleased because it explains why he finds some things really difficult. The dyslexic label has given him confidence and he seems a lot happier since he found out."

Fake it till you make it

Naomi Richards believes that helping a child learn how to take on the attitude of someone who is confident can also be really valuable. "Teach them how to make eye contact, stand tall, smile and look like they know what they are doing even when they don't

feel it inside," she advises. "They'll feel good even though they may be nervous or lacking confidence."

Try something completely different...

Victoria Beech (www.GodVenture.co.uk) lives in Warwickshire with her husband, Russ, and their ten month old daughter. They recently hosted an action-packed weekend away for their friend's nine-year-old son, who was suffering from a crisis of confidence as a result of being bullied at school.

"Russ did loads of cool extreme outdoors stuff with him," Victoria explains. "They chopped down a tree to make a fire - lit with a flint - on which they cooked roast chicken for dinner. They then camped in the garden - in February! He smiled more than he had done in a long while, and when we met up with him a few weeks later his behaviour was significantly improved."

Finally, in the words of a famous poem, remember that 'If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence...' ■