

Self-Efficacy: How to Help Children Believe They Can Succeed

Jessica Lux, Ed.S, NCSP
School Psychologist

We all want children to be able to cope with adversity, learn from failure, and work through difficult challenges. This requires self-efficacy—the ability to define a goal, persevere, and see oneself as capable.

It is important to distinguish between self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is feeling good about yourself. Self-efficacy is the belief that you have skills that you can rely on to help you navigate life and reach your goals. Feeling good about oneself matters, but the best way to help children feel good about themselves is to provide them with opportunities to learn what their strengths are and to help them cultivate the belief that they can rely on their strengths when facing a challenge.

Ways Adults Can Enhance Self-Efficacy

- *Challenge negative thoughts.* We can teach children to identify and challenge negative thoughts that undermine their belief in their ability to master a task. Then replace the negative thought with a positive, truthful idea.
- *Teach goal setting.* Teaching children how to set realistic goals and strategies for persisting in achieving those goals when they encounter obstacles helps them to experience greater mastery in life.
- *Notice, analyze, and celebrate successes.* We can increase self-efficacy by teaching youth to identify successes and to accurately assess their contribution.
- *Use process praise.* Emphasizing effort and strategy helps children focus their attention on variables they can control: how hard they try and the strategies used.
- *Provide opportunities for mastery experiences.* Give children opportunities to control their environment, make decisions, use and practice their skills, and try different paths to achieve their goals. This will also help build self-efficacy.
- *Be honest and realistic.* When a child fails or has a setback, don't pretend it didn't happen. It is far better to acknowledge the struggle and identify specific strengths he might use next time.

Tips for Self-Efficacy Enhancers

- *Slow down.* Because it is much easier to use global, general praise, if you are on autopilot, that's what you'll hear yourself saying. So, say to yourself something like, "Hold on. What can I say to my child that will be honest and will also help her to figure out how to use one of her strengths or talents to cope with the situation or make it better in the future?"
- *Be Specific.* Rather than say things like "You were wonderful" or "You did great," challenge yourself to name, as specifically as possible, what the child did that was wonderful or great. For example, "You passed the ball very well" or "You sang the chorus very well."
- *Name a strength.* Identify a strength or skill that your child can use to cope with the situation or to help things turn out better in the future. You can say, "You have such a great ability to speak up for yourself; how might that help you in this situation?"

Adapted from materials from the National Association of School Psychologists, the Fishful ThinkingSM Partnership, and work by Karen Reivich, PhD, University of Pennsylvania. For further information, please contact your school psychologist or go to www.fishfulthinking.com or www.nasponline.org.