

RAISING KIDS

# Why Building Self-Esteem Can Help Reduce Our Kids' Anxiety

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Do you know how your children feel about themselves? Unfortunately, it sometimes takes a shocking moment in a family to realize that a child is struggling, that they are unhappy with themselves and their life.

The way we feel about ourselves falls under the umbrella of self-esteem. We hear about self-esteem so much during the teenage years, but building a healthy self-esteem begins much earlier in a child's life.

Children who have a healthy self-esteem feel valued, accepted, confident, and proud. They think positive things about themselves and are prepared to face everyday stresses and challenges.

On the other hand, children suffering from low self-esteem tend to criticize themselves, are hard on themselves, feel insecure and not as good as others. They focus on their failures instead of their successes, lack confidence, and doubt their abilities. They worry about people judging them and not accepting them for who they are.



Unfortunately, this negative outlook can lead to them being treated poorly by others and prevent them from taking on new challenges. They give up easily and struggle to bounce back from their failures and mistakes.

According to Dr. Marilyn Sorenson of the [Self Esteem Institute](#), low self-esteem is “a thinking disorder in which people view themselves as inadequate, unacceptable, unworthy, unlovable, and/or incompetent.”

Sadly, this type of thinking can impact every aspect of daily life. It is the result of having a distorted view that affects people’s assumptions and beliefs about themselves and others. This outlook can ultimately result in being overly critical, having difficulty making decisions, and developing fears, such as who to trust and how to cope with new situations.

### **How self-esteem and anxiety are linked**

The worries that accompany prolonged low self-esteem can lead to anxiety. Children with low self-esteem will question whether they are worthy, adequate, and able to be loved because there is a discrepancy between what they wish they were like and how they view themselves. They are very self-critical, never giving themselves credit for any accomplishments.

Children with low self-esteem are also always striving to be different or better, and feel disappointed when they don’t meet their own self-imposed expectations. This perspective – especially as it builds over time – can cause them to be fearful, on guard, and always expecting the worst to happen.

Generally, people with low self-esteem have the [following fears](#):

- Will they do something that shows they are not good enough?
- Will others notice what they have done and recognize their inadequacy?
- Will they fail, lose what they have, or be abandoned?
- Will they experience humiliation, depression, devastation, or despair?

The [relationship between self-esteem and anxiety](#) ends up being an endless cycle: Low self-esteem triggers anxiety, and being anxious causes one’s confidence to diminish as fear takes over.

According to [Julia Friederike Sowislo](#) of the Department of Psychology at the University of Basel in Switzerland, who analyzed 18 studies regarding anxiety, low self-esteem is equally effective at raising the risk of anxiety as anxiety is at decreasing self-esteem. She concluded that low self-esteem makes people vulnerable to obsessing over negative thoughts, which can result in anxiety and depression.

Essentially, people with anxiety disorder do not have enough confidence in themselves to confront their problems. They feel and act helpless, only causing more anxiety for the next time they face a similar situation. Of course, this is all just a distorted view driven by their low self-esteem.

A typical example of how this works was pointed out by Dr. Marilyn Sorenson of the Self Esteem Institute. People with low self-confidence tend to worry about looking like a fool in front of others. This may cause them to become so nervous in social situations that they develop social anxiety and/or panic attacks. They may then avoid certain activities and shy away from relationships, which can impact the quality of their lives.

### How to raise children with healthy self-esteem

Our children do not become confident because we praise them constantly and reward them for every little move they make. Instead, children need to lose and fail in order to build resiliency so they can keep on learning and growing.

According to experts, self-esteem results from experiences in which children feel accepted, capable, and effective. Here are some ways that you can help your child build their self-esteem based on three criteria:

#### Accepted

- **Love your children unconditionally.** Let them know that you love them no matter how much they fail or how many bad decisions they make. Let them know that perfection is not the goal. Learning, growing, trying new things, and experiencing all that life has to offer is more important than whether they win or lose, pass or fail.
- **Show them you understand them.** When kids feel understood by a parent, they are likely to accept themselves, too. Keep the line of communication open, and be a supportive listener.
- **Make them feel special.** Help your children discover their interests, talents, and strengths. Teach them that it is okay to feel proud for their own accomplishments (as long as they don't think they are better than everyone else, of course).
- **Avoid harsh criticism.** Be careful how you speak to your children. The words and tone you use can really impact their self-worth.

#### Capable

- **Praise strategically.** Praising our kids too much can backfire. Try praising their effort or attitude as opposed to qualities they can't change, like their athletic ability. Also, avoid focusing on results (such as getting an A) and more on the hard work they put into something.
- **Let them do things themselves.** Step back and allow your children to try new activities without holding their hand. Give them the space to take risks and make mistakes so they can learn how to solve problems on their own. They will feel so proud when they accomplish tasks by themselves.
- **Support them from a distance.** When teaching them how to do new things, let them know that you are available to help them if they need it. Then let them do what they can, even if they make mistakes. Keep challenging them to reach new levels.
- **Expand their horizons.** Give them plenty of opportunities to try new activities, see new places, and meet different people. The more their comfort zone expands, the better they will handle worrisome situations in the future. If they are scared, encourage but don't push too hard.

#### Effective

- **Set realistic, attainable goals.** By setting goals, we help encourage our children to take on new challenges. When they reach them, they can feel happy and proud of their accomplishments. Be sure to set SMART goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely. Being flexible is also important throughout this process.
- **Let them make their own choices.** Give your kids the chance to make some age-appropriate choices, such as picking out their own clothes, what snack to eat, or which toy to take on vacation. Allowing our kids to make their own decisions will help them feel powerful and confident. They will also learn how to consider the consequences of their decisions and to take responsibility for their actions. A really good trick is to give them three options to choose from, which still gives them a sense of empowerment.
- **Give them responsibilities.** In building self-esteem, kids need opportunities to demonstrate their competence and value. Give them some simple chores to do around the house – no reward necessary because their reward will be how proud they feel.

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