



PARENTS' GUIDE TO BUILDING YOUR CHILD'S CONFIDENCE



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Introduction

Given the right opportunities, there are so many things in life your child could do. But without confidence, your child may hold back and be afraid to take the small risks that help them to grow.

Confidence is a complex, fragile thing. It isn't a concrete skill that you can teach to children. Rather, it is built up over time, through little pieces of encouragement, support and experience.

The key to building a child's confidence is to give them the sense that even if things go wrong, they will have support and they will cope. A vital ingredient to this sense of security is building a strong, respectful relationship with your child, so that they know that even if they don't always succeed, you will always be kind and supportive.

This guide will give you practical tips to help build that strong relationship and nurture confidence in two different age groups — 4-11 year olds and 12-18 year olds.

As a primary teacher, the children I worry about least are the 'rascals' – the ones who have the confidence to push the boundaries a bit without going overboard – they are the ones who will try new things and have their voices heard. The ones I worry about the most are the very quiet, obedient ones who never question anything – they tend to get swept along and can be overlooked.

A blue-tinted photograph of a man and a young girl. The man is on the left, leaning over and looking down at a book. The girl is on the right, also looking down at the book. The background is a solid blue color.

Ages 4-11

**“If you don’t have confidence,
you’ll always find a way not to
win”**

Carl Lewis

Inject positivity into every day

We all want to feel accepted, and to have the security of knowing that people love and care for us even if we aren't perfect. Having a sense of being worthwhile is a vital ingredient of confidence.

I got into a total rut with my two boys when they were little. In the end I realised they couldn't do anything right – I was snapping at them constantly and they were stressed. So I eased off, stopped getting so wound up about normal small child behaviour and started recognising the little things they did right. We were all so much happier for it. Of course they still pushed my buttons, but we remembered to have some fun too.

Take time out of each day to just be positive with your child, even if it's only for a couple of minutes. If necessary, set your phone alarm to remind you. Don't set any conditions, don't wait until they've done something to 'deserve' it. When the alarm goes off, stop what you're doing, go to them, smile, say something nice, ask them a question, give them a hug and a kiss (if they want one!). Do it even if they've been particularly trying that day.

It may seem forced or silly at first, but you will find that if you do it consistently it becomes easier and more natural. It's a simple activity that fosters what psychologists call 'unconditional positive regard,' giving your child a sense that they are loved no matter what, an essential component of self-esteem and confidence.

Scaffold your child's learning

Developmental psychologists have identified 'scaffolding' as an excellent way to teach a child while building their confidence.

Scaffolding involves breaking a complex task down into smaller steps and supporting your child in mastering each of the smaller steps so that they experience success quickly and easily while building up to the harder, more complex goal.

As they master each step, you slowly withdraw the scaffolding until finally they can complete the task with no support.

For example, when teaching a child to set the table, you might ask them to take the tablemats out by themselves and then do all of the other steps with them. Next time you give them the cutlery but they set them out on their own, and so on until finally they can do the entire thing independently. This process is sociable and supportive – you are not instructing the child, you are simply doing something with them and they are learning from you. Success comes quickly and the child feels competent and able.

A lack of confidence can hinder but there's no point really pushing a child out of their boundaries in a misplaced attempt to "make" them more confident. A lot of confidence develops through achieving success, so it doesn't necessarily have to come first, because it's more a self-perpetuating cycle.

Improving social confidence – social stories

Some children pick up social skills very easily and form friendships with very little difficulty. For other children, the things they need to do to connect with other people are not obvious to them – they need to be explicitly taught.

"When I was a child, I was what people called 'shy' but really I was just baffled by social situations. Everyone else seemed to know some secret code but I hadn't a clue. It was only when my aunt, who herself has Asperger's Syndrome, explained it all to me in simple terms that I started to get it. I'm not great now, but at least I can do the basics."

Social stories were originally developed to assist children with autism but they can be useful for all children. They are simple stories or comic strips that you create with your child. The child describes a situation that they are having difficulty with, for example, approaching other children in the playground at lunchtime. Using simple stick drawings you and your child explore the situation and imagine together how they might handle the situation. You then read through your story as many times as the child needs (this can be every night for weeks if necessary) until they feel they know what to do. If the situation changes you can write a new story to tackle any new problems. [The National Autistic Society](#) has more information on social stories.

Extra curricular activities

If your child struggles at school, finding a hobby that allows them to feel successful can be a huge boost to their confidence. Drama, dance and singing are particularly good for scaffolding confident behaviour. Developing a love of sport at a young age can be a great way to improve confidence in later years, particularly during puberty when body confidence can be an issue.



Ages 12-18

I never ask my teens directly how they're feeling – I try to make sure I cook with them, give them lifts, anything that allows them the space to just start talking. It's when they're relaxed that they reveal what's bothering them.

While teens like to send the message that they don't need you, they most certainly do. Teens go through massive physical and mental changes and are under more and more pressure at school. Stroppy, uncommunicative or downright bad behaviour can be a symptom of a very confused teen who is really struggling with these changes. They need a lot of support to face the new challenges ahead of them with confidence.

Watch your words

It may not be obvious, but teens crave their parents' approval and support. They are finding their identity and can be very sensitive to jokey comments – try to hold off on sarcasm as much as you can.

If your teen is rude to you, let them know you are hurt and that their comment isn't acceptable but do not retaliate. You have immense power over how a teen feels about themselves and a nasty comment from you can be devastating.

"I was a nightmare when I was a teenager, mainly because I felt so awful most of the time. I put my mum through hell. She was very patient, but one day she said quietly that she sometimes wished I wasn't there. When she saw my face she apologised and I do forgive her, but it still hurts."

Persistently rude behaviour may indicate mental health issues, such as depression. Rather than taking the behaviour personally, it's worth seeing it as an indication that your teen is struggling and may need help. This [NHS website](#) has some excellent advice on spotting and dealing with depression in a teenager.

Remember that even if something seems trivial to you, it can be a very big deal to your teen so try to acknowledge their feelings, even if you think they're overreacting. Belittling or mocking their feelings will damage your relationship with them and undermine their confidence.



Foster independence

Resist the urge to micromanage a disorganised teen. Make it clear that they are responsible for their own possessions and support them in taking responsibility for everyday tasks like laundry, cooking and tidying up. You may encounter resistance at first but teens who have a sense of responsibility and control will feel more confident. Remember that a task like laundry might seem simple to you, but a teen may need to be explicitly taught how to complete it successfully.

I was really surprised at how pleased my teenager was when I told her she had to do her own laundry. I thought she'd kick off, but actually she liked being able to clean the things she needed when she needed them. She even washes my stuff from time to time!

Build body confidence

Be wary of the messages you send about weight and food – if you comment constantly on how you need to lose weight your teen may start to worry about their own weight. Encouraging your teen to engage in sport can be the best way to boost their body confidence. The emphasis should be on fun rather than on competition or losing weight. Engaging in just half an hour of exercise three times a week has been shown to improve health and lower stress. It doesn't have to involve much expense – a jog around the block will do. Developing confidence in their physical ability will help to lower anxiety about looks. [The NHS](#) has some guidance on how to deal with serious body confidence issues.

Acceptance

Nobody is perfect. Confidence comes from knowing you are good enough. You may worry that your teen isn't popular enough or that they aren't as successful as their friends. Keep it to yourself. A teen needs to feel that their parents are proud of them. Your teen may be very different to you or may not turn out exactly as you wanted, but criticising or expressing disappointment will not help – it will just make your teen resent you and it will severely damage their confidence. Accepting your teen for who they are and allowing them to find their own path will help them to accept themselves and feel happy in their own skin.

I was an awkward child and I wished and hoped that my son would be popular and outgoing. But he isn't; he's just like me. I realised I had to like myself in order to like him. It was very healing, actually, to finally accept myself.



Dealing with bullying

Bullying can destroy a child's confidence. If you suspect your child is being bullied at school, you should talk to their teacher, but only if your teen is happy for you to do that. There are various ways for your teen to tackle the bully themselves, by ignoring them, by asking them directly to stop, by gaining backup and support from peers, but if the bullying is persistent and the school fails to deal with it then it may be time to move to another school.

[School Reviewer](#) has reviews from other parents that will help you in choosing the right school for your child. We recommend that you leave a review of your child's school, so that other parents can be aware of the difficulties you experienced.

If your child's confidence has been very damaged by bullying, seek a qualified counsellor, either through your GP or privately.

Confidence isn't about feeling like you're better than everyone else, it's about feeling ok with being human and fallible. A confident person is someone who doesn't need to constantly compete and prove themselves but who can accept that they're not perfect and move on from their own mistakes. Confident people can say 'sorry' and 'I was wrong,' without being devastated or angry.

“I never lose. I either win, or learn.”
Nelson Mandela



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