



# Self-Efficacy: Helping Children Believe They Can Succeed

“I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.”

These words from the book *The Little Engine That Could*, so familiar to generations of children and parents, capture a basic life attitude that all parents want their children to have: If I try, I will succeed. We all want our 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. Parents and other adults can help children develop self-efficacy by reinforcing their strengths and helping them identify steps or paths to achieve their goals.

## SELF-EFFICACY VERSUS SELF-ESTEEM

It is natural to want to make children feel better when they are upset. Our first instinct is often to try to boost their self-esteem with general words of praise such as, “You did great,” “It will be fine,” or “I think you are the best.” While such “self-esteem enhancers” may sound soothing, they do not promote self-efficacy. Indeed, self-esteem and self-efficacy are not the same. 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 to cultivate the belief that they can rely on their strengths when facing a challenge.

## BUILDING BLOCKS OF SELF-EFFICACY

There are four sources that contribute to the development of self-efficacy in children and youth.

***Building Block 1: Mastery experiences.*** When a child attributes a success to internal, stable, and global factors, (“I got an A on my test because I am smart and know how to study.”), he will experience a sense of mastery and this will reinforce his self-efficacy. When a child attributes success to external, unstable, and specific factors, (“Total luck! The test was really easy and the teacher gave everyone good grades.”), he will not experience a sense of mastery or efficacy.

***Building Block 2: Observing others.*** Seeing someone who is similar to oneself work hard to achieve a goal or overcome an obstacle contributes to our belief that we, too, can successfully negotiate our environment. For example, if a first-grade child sees her friend climb to the top of the jungle gym after several attempts, the first grader might think to herself, “If Laura can do it, I can, too.” The more similar the child feels to the person she is observing, the stronger the effect the other person’s successes or failures will be on the child’s beliefs about her own ability to succeed.

**Building Block 3: Direct persuasion by others.** Children’s beliefs about their ability to master a situation are influenced by what they hear from their teachers, parents, coaches, and friends. Children who receive strong messages that they have the skills and capabilities to handle a situation are more likely to put in greater effort and to persist in the face of setback. However, such feedback cannot consist of general or empty pep talks (“You can do anything.”) but rather must reflect the child’s real strengths and be specific (“You are good at solving problems. You can think of a creative solution.”).

**Building Block 4: Mood.** Positive emotions and mood build perceptions of efficacy and negative emotions and mood weaken them. People who experience positive emotion can also experience “upward spirals” such that their positive emotions enable them to see more solutions to problems they face, which strengthens their positivity, which further enhances their ability to cope with challenges, and on and on. These upward spirals can lead to strengthening a child’s perception that she can effectively control her environment.

## ADULTS CAN ENHANCE SELF-EFFICACY

Just as adults can help teach children the skill of optimism, they can help children develop 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. Adults can teach children and youth to challenge negative thinking by helping them to first identify the negative thought and then to use evidence to prove why the negative thought is inaccurate. 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. Helping children to increase their pathways thinking (thinking that helps identify or create many paths to a goal) and agency thinking (thinking that helps keep motivation up while pursuing a goal) helps them experience greater hope and more success in achieving the goal.

**Notice, analyze, and celebrate successes.** We can increase self-efficacy by teaching youth to identify successes and to accurately assess their contribution. For example, parents or teachers can work with children to keep a “success journal” in which they record successes and list the skills, talents, and strategies that they used to bring about the positive outcome. This not only helps children build positive self-perceptions, but it also creates positive emotion, which in turn leads to more creative thinking and enhanced problem solving.

**Use process praise.** Process praise, in which children are praised for their efforts and the strategies they used to bring about a success (e.g., “You did well because you kept at it and tried different ways to solve the problem.”), can lead to greater mastery, persistence, and achievement than simply praising children for being smart (e.g., “You did well because you’re just so smart!”). 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. Creating opportunities for children to make decisions, use and practice their skills, and try different paths to achieve their goals will help build self-efficacy. This requires genuinely knowing the child’s strengths and being able to link those to their goals.

**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 ("That must have been really hard. I can see why you are disappointed.") and identify specific strengths he might use next time ("You pass the ball really well. Passing might be more effective than shooting from so far away."). When we help children to pay attention to their skills and strengths and help them to figure out how to use them more fully, we are teaching them self-efficacy. And, acknowledging the reality of the situation conveys that you genuinely understand what the child has experienced and helps her see herself as someone who can cope with a challenge.

## TIPS FOR SELF-EFFICACY ENHANCERS

Using "self-efficacy enhancers" instead of "self-esteem enhancers" gives children more concrete, realistic feedback on how to persevere. Adults can develop the ability to use self-efficacy enhancers, but it takes practice. It is harder than simply patting our children on the back and saying, "You are a star!" The effort, however, will pay off for the child and you. Adults who develop this skill report feeling that they are communicating more honestly with their children—and that's a win for all involved!

**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, "Your bounce passes were really strong" or "You sang the high notes really well." This means that you have to pay attention!

**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?" or "I've seen you use your sense of humor to help you in other situations; is there a way it can help you here?" or "You've got really strong passing skills; how could you rely on those more in the next game?"

Remember, the more you practice self-efficacy enhancers, the easier they will become.

## RESOURCES

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Reivich, K. & Shatté, A. (2003). *The Resilience Factor: 7 keys to finding your inner strength and overcoming life's hurdles*. New York: Broadway Books.

For more activities to help build efficacy in your children, visit [www.fishfulthinking.com](http://www.fishfulthinking.com) and National Association of School Psychologists at [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org). This parent resource is part of the National Association of School Psychologists and Fishful Thinking<sup>SM</sup> Partnership and is adapted from work by Karen Reivich, PhD, University of Pennsylvania, as part of the Fishful Thinking program.

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