

Supporting Self-Esteem and Building Confidence

Helping your child develop a sense of worth that is bigger than mistakes, school performance, forgotten tasks or difficult days.

Self-esteem is not built by telling a child they are amazing often enough. It grows through relationships, belonging, being understood, developing skills, experiencing achievable success and learning that mistakes do not change their worth. Children with ADHD can encounter frequent correction because the difficulties adults notice - interrupting, forgetting, losing things, moving, rushing, missing instructions or struggling to begin - happen repeatedly across an ordinary day.

When feedback is dominated by what went wrong, a child may begin to form conclusions about themselves: 'I'm lazy', 'I'm naughty', 'I'm stupid', 'I always ruin things' or 'Everyone else can do this except me'. Confidence support therefore needs to go beyond praise. It involves changing the story around difficulty while still helping the child build the skills they need.

Listen for the story underneath the words

What the child may say	What may sit underneath	A more useful response
'I'm stupid.'	Repeated difficulty, comparison, embarrassment or a task that exceeds current skills/support.	Acknowledge the struggle, identify the specific difficulty and separate it from intelligence or worth.
'I can't do anything right.'	The child's attention may be captured by recent corrections and failures.	Do not argue immediately. Help them find one concrete example of what worked and what support helped.
'I don't care.'	Protecting themselves from disappointment can feel safer than admitting something matters.	Stay curious. Reduce pressure and create an achievable next step rather than demanding enthusiasm.
'Everyone hates me.'	Conflict, rejection, misunderstanding or intense emotion may be making one event feel global.	Validate the hurt, then gently explore what happened without confirming an absolute conclusion.

Separate the child from the difficulty

Language matters. 'Your bag system isn't working yet' describes a solvable problem. 'You're so disorganised' describes the child. 'That choice hurt someone' keeps responsibility while avoiding 'You're horrible'. Children need honest boundaries and feedback, but they also need to know that behaviour, performance and executive-function difficulties are not their identity.

Strengths do not need to be exceptional

A strengths-based approach does not mean every child needs a special talent. Strengths can be curiosity, humour, persistence, fairness, creativity, noticing details, kindness to animals, enthusiasm, imagination, problem solving, loyalty, practical skill or willingness to try again. Look for qualities in ordinary moments, not only achievements that earn certificates.

Building confidence through everyday experiences

Confidence develops when a child experiences themselves as capable. If tasks are consistently too difficult, too long or too dependent on unsupported executive-function skills, encouragement alone will not create confidence. Adjusting the task so the child can genuinely participate is not lowering their worth; it can create the conditions in which skills grow.

Notice specifically

Instead of 'good job', name what happened: 'You went back for your water bottle without me reminding you' or 'You kept trying when that was frustrating.'

Create achievable responsibility

Give meaningful jobs the child can succeed at with the right support. Contribution builds belonging as well as competence.

Let interests matter

Interests can provide places where a child feels knowledgeable, engaged and successful. They do not have to become a career to be valuable.

Repair after conflict

A difficult morning does not need to define the whole day. Reconnection teaches that relationships can survive mistakes, anger and misunderstanding.

Praise effort carefully

Effort matters, but praising effort when the child is repeatedly failing can feel hollow. Pair encouragement with useful support. 'I can see how hard you're working; let's change the way we're doing this' communicates that persistence is noticed and that the child is not expected to struggle indefinitely to prove they tried.

Comparison can quietly damage confidence

Siblings, classmates and even a child's past performance can become comparison points. Try to measure progress against the child's own starting point and the support they currently need. A child who requires reminders, movement breaks or extra time is not achieving 'less honestly' because those supports are present.

When school becomes part of the self-esteem problem

If a child repeatedly describes themselves as stupid, bad or incapable in relation to school, look beyond reassurance. Are they regularly missing instructions? Is work inaccessible? Are they being sanctioned for difficulties linked to unmet needs? Are friendships or bullying involved? Share concerns with school and ask what patterns staff are seeing. Confidence cannot be repaired solely at home if the child continues to experience repeated failure or humiliation elsewhere.

Allow competence outside academics

School performance is only one part of a child's life. Cooking, gaming, cycling, drawing, caring for pets, making people laugh, building things, music, sport, technology, helping younger children or knowing everything about a favourite subject can all provide genuine experiences of competence and connection.

Create a Confidence Map

Use this page to build a fuller picture of your child than the difficulties that demand the most attention. Complete it gradually and, where appropriate, invite your child to add their own view.

Things my child enjoys	_____
Things they know a lot about	_____
Qualities I notice in everyday life	_____
Things other people value about them	_____
Skills they are developing	_____
Situations where they feel capable	_____
Support that helps them succeed	_____
Negative labels they may have started believing	_____
A more accurate and compassionate description	_____
One opportunity for achievable success this week	_____

When low self-esteem needs more support

Take persistent negative self-talk seriously, particularly when it is increasing, affecting everyday life or accompanied by withdrawal, significant anxiety, low mood, self-harm, hopelessness or statements about not wanting to be alive. Seek appropriate professional support rather than assuming this is simply part of ADHD. Immediate concerns about a child's safety require urgent help through appropriate local emergency or crisis services.

A message for parents

Children do not need adults to pretend everything they do is wonderful. They need adults who can see the whole person while helping with the difficult parts. Your child can need support with organisation, emotions, attention or behaviour and still be funny, thoughtful, inventive, determined, loving and worth knowing exactly as they are. Confidence grows when those truths are allowed to exist together.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. Where confidence is being affected by school experiences, parents can also discuss needs with the school's SENCO or relevant SEND staff. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 11