Establishing confident mindsets for children

by Michael Grose

Confident children automatically think differently to those with low self-esteem. Their mindset or habit of the mind is different to those children with low self-esteem. They know that they will more than likely be successful at many of the activities that they tackle. They will not necessarily succeed the first time but with effort and patience they will succeed eventually.

The work of Dr. Michael Bernard, the author of the popular ‘You Can Do It’ Program that is used in schools throughout Australia, US and UK tells us a great deal about the habits of mind or mindsets that are needed for confidence. Bernard found that confident children had high levels of self-acceptance. Confident children took realistic credit for their achievements and didn’t allow mistakes or failures to deter them from future efforts. Confident kids also took more risks as learners and were more willing to tackle new tasks that may initially lead to some psychological discomfort.

Children with low confidence or negative self-esteem constantly put themselves down or negate efforts by others to praise them. They also tended to be perfectionists who often were unlikely to tackle tasks unless they knew they could excel.

Confident children didn’t measure their self-esteem according the level of approval of significant others, while children who are low in confidence constantly seek the approval and praise of significant adults.

The good news is that parents can influence their children’s thinking habits. This conscious role modelling is a powerful way of influencing children’s thinking habits.

1. Model positive mindsets.

Parents provide the lens or frame through which children see the world and also see themselves. Conscious role modelling is a powerful way of influencing children’s thinking habits.

2. Develop phrases for the mindsets of confidence & be persistent in their use.

Did your mother or grandmother every repeat proverbs such as ‘A stitch in time saves nine,’ or ‘If a job is worth doing it is worth doing well?’ My mother seemed to have a saying for every circumstance. These proverbs stick in the memories of those exposed to them as they are short, memorable and were generally repeated often. The same principle applies with confident mindsets. Develop a number of key phrases around the following three mindsets:

Self-acceptance: “You’re okay even if you make a mistake.”
Taking risks: “Have a red-hot go.”
Being Independent: “It’s what you think not what others think that is important.”

Use these phrases repeatedly when appropriate situations arise, much in the same way as our grandparents of past generations relied on proverbs and saying to teach some important lessons to children and young people.

3. Catch them in the act

Keep your antennae open for confident mindsets and point out to children when they have displayed confident behaviour.

Examples:
For self-acceptance: ‘You tried really hard to make the team but you missed this time. You must be pleased that you tried out.’ ‘It’s good to try and missing out can be disappointing but it doesn’t mean you are not a good player.’
For taking risks: ‘That was great to see you get up in front of the school and give a talk. That was new and maybe a little scary but it will be easier next time.’

Being independent: ‘Wow! You must be proud of yourself for doing extra work on that project. Its you that you have to please not use or your teacher.’

This type of positive, descriptive feedback is useful as it helps children and young people form a link between their attitudes and the outcomes of their behaviours.

4. Reframe negative mindsets

Teach children to reframe their negative mindsets and attitudes by stating them in a more positive way. Reframing is in effect replacing a negative way of viewing an event with a more positive way.

Teach kids to reframe negative or unpleasant experiences into positive events. While this may sound ‘Pollyannaish’, looking for a bright side to experiences is a useful habit to teach young people.

Some examples of reframing negative events into positives are:

- ‘You lost the Grand Final by a point but think how pleased you will be when you finally win.’
- ‘You didn’t do so well with that essay but you can pick up some valuable pointers for next time.’
- ‘It is disappointing that it is raining and you can’t go outside. But you can play some of those indoor games that your have been meaning to get around to for so long.’

You can find out more about Confidence-building in Michael Grose’s Confidence Program: Creative ways to boost confidence in kids available at: www.parentingideas.com.au.