

I know I can!

Raising children who believe in themselves

The elementary school years provide no shortage of character-shaping experiences for children, including making new friends, exercising more independence, and proactively managing schoolwork. Although these new experiences will help build confidence in your child, they also open the door to situations that could shake your child's sense of self-worth.

That's why a strong character foundation is important to help your child maintain his sense of self through believing in himself and doing his best despite life's many challenges. This foundation is built at home, and there's no one better than you to oversee its construction.

Building your child's confidence at home

Every family unit is unique, so approaches will vary widely when it comes to preparing children for the world outside the home. But on the whole, parents and guardians would likely agree that their goal is to raise kind, considerate, independent children who are successful, happy and positive contributors to society.

This is the driving force behind character education, not just in school, but at home as well. You can help your child work toward these goals by taking the following steps:

Evaluate your daily routine and the way you spend each week. Keeping a predictable daily routine and making time to spend with your child is very important to character education. A child can benefit from simple predictabilities, such as waking up and going to bed at about the same time each day, knowing she will be eating dinner with you, and following clear plans for getting cleaned and dressed. When things at home run as smooth as possible, your child will feel centered enough to confidently take on each day. So, try your best to stick to a schedule that creates structure and provides opportunities for confidence-boosting quality time as a family.

Model positive ways to handle emotions. Because they lack emotional maturity, elementary school-aged children often need a little practice when it comes to calmly handling some of their emotions. Though life's unpredictability can sometimes cause even the most even-tempered adult to break, you can still encourage your child to proactively handle problems – and boost your child's confidence in the process. Teach your child to talk through problems rationally instead of trying to solve them physically or with unkind words. Encourage your child to employ simple practices, such as counting to 10 or taking a few deep breaths. There are also many constructive activities that can help your child cool off, such as running around the backyard or even squeezing some Play-Doh. Taking time outs from emotional situations can help your child remember to think rationally before he acts out.

Understand and discuss what your child sees and hears. Children are bombarded with so many messages each day, from television, the Internet, video games, books, magazines and their peers. Each family will choose to moderate and control this onslaught of information in its own way, but it's important to communicate openly with your child about the ideas she comes in contact with each day, in accordance with your family's values and lifestyle. This will help her separate reality from fantasy and learn to process information with a level head.

Teach tolerance. Now that he's in school, your child will meet many people that are different from him on a regular basis. How your child treats people he meets outside your home will primarily be determined by what he learns from you inside your home. Showing acceptance of others and a willingness to interact and work together despite differences in appearance, lifestyle or beliefs will teach your child to emulate the same type of behavior in school and in the world. Practicing tolerance will help your child to be successful in school and make friends, which can build his confidence.

Practice positive talk. Pointing out and praising your child's positive attributes and accomplishments can help her feel accepted and secure in her abilities. Likewise, be mindful of how often you put down yourself or others, especially in front of your child. Teaching your child to have healthy self-esteem is easier when you are able to view yourself and those around you in a positive light.

Get organized. Even if organization isn't your strong suit, you can still teach your child the stress-reducing benefits of basic organization. Here are some suggestions:

- Arrange a time in the evening for your child to help you pack lunches for the next day.
- Encourage your child to take on a task around the house, such as putting laundry in the dryer or helping to set the table for dinner.
- Provide a designated space for your child to empty and fill his backpack for school.
- Establish a structured time and place for homework.
- Little actions like these can help your child feel like part of the family team, and can show him that you value his input and support his work.

Character education in school

In September 2010, the “Dignity For All Students Act” was signed into law in New York State. The goal of this law is to provide all students with a harassment-free learning environment by requiring school districts to revise codes of conduct and train school staff in non-discriminatory instructional and counseling methods, as well as to raise awareness about harassment issues among both students and staff.

This means that now more than ever, character education plays a vital role in the elementary school curriculum. Character lessons encourage positive behavior and interactions, which in turn help to foster a safe learning environment where children can excel academically as well as socially. The earlier children learn the value of positive character traits, the better.

For quite some time, character-building programs have been part of the elementary school experience. Now, these programs are helping to ensure school districts meet the requirements in the Dignity For All Students Act with greater ease.

PBIS : www.pbis.org

One such character education program is called PBIS, or “Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports.” Through this program, teachers and staff members can help students learn positive behaviors that build character and develop a constructive school culture built upon mutual respect between students and staff.

Through PBIS, students learn positive behavior expectations and are later recognized for exhibiting those behaviors without being prompted. For example, a school might choose a “character trait of the month,” and teachers will alert students that they will be watching for students to display that trait throughout the month. This tactic helps students be mindful of how they treat others and think about ways they can embody each character trait.

Character Counts! <http://charactercounts.org>

A program offered by the Josephson Institute, “Character Counts!” aims to inspire good habits and behaviors in children. The program offers school districts access to agenda books that help children stay on task with schoolwork, training seminars on bullying and other issues, and resources for teachers, such as discussion cards that address various behaviors, worksheets and classroom activities that teach positive character traits. Programs like PBIS and Character Counts! vary from school to school and from grade level to grade level. Your child's principal can answer any questions you may have about character education in your child's school.

Summer fun that builds character

Traditional summer camps offer great opportunities for your child to learn teamwork, respect and responsibility. But this option doesn't fit into every family's lifestyle or budget. However, there are plenty of other summer

options available in your community that can help your child learn important character traits while having fun in the process.

Enroll in swimming lessons. A number of area organizations offer swimming lessons for young children at little or no cost. Swimming lessons can help your child learn to get along with peers, take direction and build confidence. Call your local YMCA, which will work with your family to provide opportunities at a price that fits in your budget, or inquire at colleges in your area to see if they have students willing to offer summer lessons.

Head to the playground. Schools and public parks follow strict safety regulations when it comes to their playground areas. Under your supervision, your child can play safely while getting some exercise and learning to interact positively with children they may not know. The playground is a great place to make new friends, or you can arrange an outing with your child's friends from school or your neighborhood.

Arrange a scavenger hunt. Whether it's a warm, sunny day or raining outside, a scavenger hunt is a versatile activity that you can adapt to your child's interests – as well as the weather. Develop a scavenger hunt list for items around your house or visit an area nature trail to let your child check off a list that's full of plants, animals, street signs, or whatever else you can think of!

Read together. If your child is more of a bookworm, local libraries offer numerous summer reading programs. You can also create a special place for your child to read by setting up a hammock or comfortable lounge chair in your yard.

Go camping... at home. There's no need for elaborate camping equipment when you camp out just steps from your door or even in your living room. Encourage your child to find items you will all need to camp as a family, such as blankets, sleeping bags, and supplies to see in the dark, such as flashlights. Help your child make quick and easy camping snacks, such as S'mores or popcorn in the microwave. For a little extra indoor camping fun, encourage your child to figure out a way to build a tent using household items, such as bed sheets or couch cushions (for holding up the tent).

Online resources:

Summer reading ideas and activities: <http://www.summerreadingnys.org>

Playground locator: <http://playspacefinder.kaboom.org/>

Kids games for any type of weather: <http://health.kaboose.com/active-kids/games.html>

Books about character building

“Character Building Activities for Kids,” by Darlene Mannix

“10-Minute Life Lessons for Kids: 52 Fun and Simple Games and Activities to Teach Your Child Honesty, Trust, Love, and Other Important Values,” by Jamie C. Miller

“What Do You Stand For? For Kids: A Guide to Building Character,” by Barbara A. Lewis