

## Helping Your Kids Recognize Their Strengths

10/27/2020

*“Comparison is the thief of joy.”*

Theodore Roosevelt made a great point in the above quote. Every week, I talk with kids, teens and young adults who have no idea how amazing they are. I hear variations of “I know I get good grades, but I’m not that smart” and “I’m not as good as one of my teammates, so it means that I’m not good at this.” This is from kids who are in advanced classes, get great grades, are outstanding athletes, are talented artists, etc.

So, what is going on?!



One of the things I consistently hear from these kids is some form of comparison to other people. It’s very all or nothing thinking- if they’re not the best or if they make a mistake (ever), then they’re no good and all their talents are meaningless. This often results in them brushing off compliments or even arguing when someone points out something they’ve done well.

The other thing I hear all the time from these kids is the feeling that if they acknowledge their talents, they are somehow bragging or are not being humble. Saying that they’re great at something literally feels like they’re doing something wrong.

Sound familiar? Do your kids have a hard time recognizing their greatness? Do they constantly compare themselves to others? When they do show some pride in themselves, have you heard other people (maybe even yourself) tell them not to brag?

Now, I'm not encouraging kids to become arrogant or *overconfident* or to ignore their faults. But I am encouraging them to embrace all the wonderful things about themselves.



As a parent, how do you help?

First, give your kids lots of encouragement and show pride in their abilities *and* in who they are as people. Give compliments! I'm sure you do this already, but many parents (and people in general) fall into the habit of focusing mainly on outcomes and accomplishments because those are the things that stand out most. It's also important to praise the personal characteristics that you like about your kids. Those are often the hardest things for them to recognize in themselves. Go beyond descriptors like kind and caring. Really think about what makes your kids great people and then tell them about those qualities- often.

Second, help your kids practice patting themselves on the back. When they've accomplished something, get them to talk about what they did well and what they bring to the table. Get them used to talking about their strengths. It's not bragging to talk about what you're good at. Humility is great, but not at the expense of your kids' self-esteem.



Third, avoid comparisons. It can be really, really difficult not to compare your kids to other kids or to each other. You probably won't be able to stop yourself from making comparisons in your head but avoid saying them out loud. Trust me, your kids are already getting lots of practice comparing themselves to others, they don't need help doing it more. When your kids do talk about themselves in comparison to others, listen closely to see what they're actually saying. If they're using comparison to set goals or improve their own performance (e.g., "James beat me in that race, but I'm practicing every day to get faster"; "Nadia came in first at the science fair. Next year, I'll do some extra research so that I can win first place!"), that can be helpful and act as motivation for to improve or to learn new skills.

However, if the comparisons they are making lead them to devalue their own abilities (e.g., "James beat me in that race, so I stink at track"; "Nadia came in first place at the science fair. I'm never going to be smart like she is."), then that's where you intervene. When your kids make unhelpful comparisons, redirect their attention to their own strengths- ask them questions and get them to tell you what they do well or what was great about how they performed on whatever task they're talking about. Alternately, get them to talk about their effort or preparation. Are they actually great at science but they waited to do their project until the night before? If so, then they need to recognize that they're awesome at science. They also just learned that waiting until the last minute may hinder their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. The conversation shifts from a broad, false statement about ability to a discussion of how to best highlight their skills in the future. It helps the most if they come up with this information themselves, but if they're struggling to do so you can help them out by pointing out what you noticed and getting them to talk about those things.



As you might expect based on our other posts, one final thing you can do is model this type of behavior for your kids. If they see and hear you appreciating your strengths, it won't seem like a strange thing for them to do for themselves. When someone gives you a compliment, let your kids see you accept it gracefully without brushing it off. When you've done a good job, let your kids see your excitement and pride in yourself. Seeing you do these things will let your kids know it's okay to embrace their greatness.