

Supporting mental health in young children

The coronavirus pandemic has taken a toll on kids of all ages, but even little kids can learn how to cope with mental health challenges. Here are some tips on helping young children manage big emotions and build confidence.

HELPING KIDS COPE

- **Validate and name feelings.** It's important for little kids to know that big emotions are normal and manageable. When they're upset, let them know that you hear them: "It sounds like you're really angry right now. I feel that way sometimes too."
- **Solve problems together.** Talk over what's bothering them and brainstorm solutions, instead of just telling them what you think they should do. To get kids talking, lead with curiosity and ask open-ended questions: "What was the most fun you had today? What was the toughest part?"
- **Model managing difficult feelings.** If your child sees you angry, nervous or scared, bring them into the conversation. Tell them what you're feeling, why, and how you're going to handle it. This helps them learn to do the same.
- **Use positive attention.** When your child takes a step (even a small one!) to cope with a hard emotion, praise them right away. For instance, if you see your child take a deep breath in the middle of a tantrum, jump in: "I like that you took a deep breath! Let's take another one together."
- **Set aside special time together.** Pick a time each day when your child will get your undivided attention for whatever activity they choose. Knowing they have that to look forward to will strengthen your bond and help them handle stress. Even five minutes makes a big difference!

Let your child know that you think they're great, whether or not they do great things.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

- **Praise perseverance.** Praise kids for their efforts (“Nice job practicing for the whole fifteen minutes!”) as much as their accomplishments. This helps them internalize that their work matters and that they don’t need to be perfect.
- **Encourage their interests.** Whatever hobby or activity your child is into, support them in pursuing it. Following their passions helps kids develop a sense of identity and build skills that translate into confidence.
- **Model positive self-talk.** Try to avoid criticizing yourself in front of your child. You can even show kids how to correct critical thoughts in real time: “I called myself stupid when I forgot the keys, but I know I’m pretty smart most of the time. Forgetting something from time to time isn’t a big deal.”
- **Show the love.** Let your child know that you think they’re great, whether or not they do great things. That means lots of affection and affirmation when they win, when they lose, and even when they drive you nuts.
- **Look out for signs of a bigger problem.** If your child has consistently low self-esteem that doesn’t improve over time and gets in the way of their daily life, consider getting support from a mental health professional.

More Resources from the Child Mind Institute

- ▶ [How to Ask What Kids Are Feeling](#)
- ▶ [How to Help Children Calm Down](#)
- ▶ [How to Help Children Manage Fears](#)
- ▶ [12 Tips for Raising Confident Kids](#)
- ▶ [How to Help Kids Who Are Too Hard on Themselves](#)

The **Child Mind Institute** is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain, and empower parents, professionals, and policymakers with free resources to help children when and where they need it most. Together with our supporters, we’re helping children reach their full potential in school and in life. We share all of our resources freely and do not accept any funding from the pharmaceutical industry. Support us at childmind.org/donate.