

# Self-efficacy and Early Years

**Maureen Hunt, Achievement for All's Early Years Lead, explores an important aspect of wellbeing and mental health: self-efficacy is a cornerstone in the foundations that underpin "character", but one that can be so easily eroded.**



Do you worry about the mental health of the children you work with?

Maybe you are wondering what you can actually do to support children with developing good mental health and to remain healthy throughout their lives. If so, you are not alone.

The statistics surrounding mental health make for stark reading – with more than half of adult diagnosed mental health disorders starting before the age of 14. The rates of referrals to CAMHS has been steadily increasing year on year and there is no doubt that the system is overloaded and close to breaking point.

We know the emotional wellbeing of a child or young person has a significant impact, not only on their mental health, but also their academic achievement and levels of progress, so it makes sense to put it front and centre in any school or early years setting and make the wellbeing of children the top priority. This obviously requires a systematic holistic approach to prevention as there is no doubt the environment can have a significant impact on a child's social and emotional development. Isn't it time that all adults working with children were proactively working to promote good mental health?

**One thing that we can all do now to promote good mental health in young children and to give them a 'protective shield' is to support the child to develop self-efficacy.**

## **What Is Self-Efficacy?**

Albert Bandura developed the idea of Self-efficacy as the belief that you are capable of performing a task or managing a situation. It is about learning how to persevere when things are difficult. A child that views themselves as competent and capable is much more likely to be able to persevere through life's challenges as they grow and develop as they will believe they have the skills to help them reach their goals. Henry Ford is reputed to have said, "Whether you think that you can or that you can't, you are usually right." According to Bandura, self-efficacy has a central role in regulation of emotional states and reducing anxiety, one of the key symptoms of mental illness.

We begin to form our sense of self-efficacy from birth, through dealing with a wide variety of experiences, tasks, and situations. For example, when a crying baby receives food or comfort it builds their sense that they have some control and are not helpless.

However, the growth of self-efficacy does not end during childhood but continues to evolve throughout life as people acquire new skills, experiences, and understanding.

**Developing a sense of self and belief in your own abilities is key to wellbeing and experiencing success early on improves self-efficacy, particularly in the under 5s who are developing their sense of self.**

This sense of self can have a profound impact on their future outcomes so it is hugely important that the adults that support children know and understand how to support this. Daily activities need to be challenging enough to keep the child's interest, but not so difficult that they become frustrating. To truly grasp a skill or task, a child needs to experience some level of difficulty while trying to learn it. After putting in the effort and succeeding, the child is motivated to try newer, more challenging tasks. Overcoming challenges also builds a child's resilience when encountering more difficult tasks; instead of feeling overwhelmed they are much more likely to have a go.

Children with poor self-efficacy have a tendency to avoid tasks they feel will be challenging and give up quickly. They often exhibit low self-confidence and may perform less well in activities than others. They often display signs of anxiety when they are directed to work on problem-based activities. Children with poor self-efficacy may limit themselves to what they think is possible because they have a belief that they are not capable of being successful. When people doubt their own abilities, they tend not to persevere, give up rapidly when encountering difficulties, and feel anxious and negative emotions as they believe they cannot cope. It is not hard to see that this is a slippery slope to poor mental health.

Adults who send helpful messages about a child's capabilities and skills to handle challenging tasks greatly influence a child's willingness to persist during setbacks. But praise must focus on effort, not ability. Praising ability undermines effort when a child has struggled and leads to comparisons between themselves and others. children who are

## Tips to build Self-Efficacy

- 1) Resist the urge to do everything for the child. Stand back and wait for them to ask for help – always allow the child to have a go, but not to struggle too much
- 2) Offer only as much help as is needed e.g. – put the zip in the slot but allow the child to pull it up
- 3) Use words of encouragement – “you are really trying, well done, you will soon be able to do that all by yourself”
- 4) Focus on the child's strengths and use them to help them overcome new challenges eg “you are really good at building with Lego, so with practice you should be able to build a really good den”
- 5) Discuss challenges and help them plan how they will overcome them.
- 6) Do not compare with others – children will all develop and master tasks at different rates. Pointing out that another child can put their own wellies on won't help them, it may even demotivate them.
- 7) Be honest – telling a child that they are good at everything will not motivate them to keep trying, it may even encourage them to give up when they realise it's not true.

praised for effort and encouraged to try regardless of the outcome, are keener to tackle new challenges.

The tips on this and the preceding page will support the child to develop a strong sense of self and of being a competent and capable learner. This is core to developing their resilience and their ability to cope when life is challenging for them.

Supporting a young child to develop self-efficacy is a powerful strategy for preventing the development of mental health problems later in life.

### How Achievement for All can help

All our programmes support teachers and early years practitioners to develop a strong sense of aspiration for each child – a real ‘I can’ attitude

Our belief is that every child, irrespective of their background, challenge or need, deserves the right not to be anxious, to achieve their potential, and lead a fulfilling and happy life. If you would like support to develop your practice in supporting good mental health and wellbeing for the children in your school or setting, please get in touch.

We have a wide range of **programmes** suitable for all Early Years settings that will support you to deliver the best possible outcomes and boost the life chances for children in your care.

We also offer **Step-Up Reviews**, 4-6 week process designed to help settings from Early Years through to Post 16 to kick start enhanced practice and rapid improvement on specific areas of need, with the support of our evidence based materials and specialist Achievement Coaches.

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## Tips to build Self-Efficacy (cont.)

8) Give the child choices – “which socks do you want to wear today – the green or blue ones?” This sends a clear message that they have control of some aspects of their life and children who have choices are more independent and self-reliant.

9) Help them see failure as learning – “you will get better at that the more you try” – don’t be tempted to just do it for them

10) Offer help if they start to show signs of anxiety or stress – ask them what they would like you to do

11) Respond to the child’s communications e.g. a baby will turn away when they don’t want any more food – respecting this builds a sense of the child having control

12) Put things just out of reach for a young baby so they can reach to get it – again this develops a sense of control

13) Give children time e.g. start to get ready to go out 20 mins before you have to leave so that the child has time to try to put on their own coat / shoes.

14) Praise for effort, not ability – “well done you tried really hard – you found that tricky, but you did it!”

15) Ask the child how the achievement made them feel “wow you have done it – how do you feel?” This encourages the child to express feelings of pride and satisfaction at their achievements