

How to Help Kids Who Are Hard on Themselves

It is common to hear kids say negative things about themselves. “I stink at math,” “I am never going to be able to pass this test,” “I am so stupid,” “Nobody likes me,” etc. Sometimes these are just careless remarks or even fishing for reassurance. However, this form of negative self-talk can be an unhealthy tendency to think the worst of themselves and may be a sign of something more serious.

Self-talk is essentially our inner monologue. It can be a way of narrating what is happening around you, practicing language, and guiding yourself through a task. Kids can often develop a pattern of negative self-talk when they are uncertain or anxious about doing well.

Here are some ways to free children from negative thinking and steer them away from destructive self-talk:

1. Be a good listener and **VALIDATE** their feelings.

It can be tempting to ignore or minimize negative statements your kids make especially when you see them as not true or unrealistic statements. Instead of dismissing these remarks, try to create a safe place where your child can express these thoughts and acknowledge the emotions. Use this as a way to initiate the conversation and an opportunity to learn more about what is going on.

2. Offer a realistic approach.

Be careful not to respond to negative statements with unrealistic positive thinking. This will invalidate what your child feels. For example, if your child is afraid of going to school the first day and says, “No one is going to talk to me,” instead of saying, “School is fun, and you are going to make hundreds of new friends,” make a realistic statement, such as, “The first day of school can be hard for everyone. It can be scary meeting new people sometimes.” Kids need to see and hear that many life situations can come with uneasiness that can be worked through.

3. Help kids have a broader perspective.

Help your son/daughter identify what specifically led to their negative statement. Then talk about how that one event or experience does not define them in total. One missed goal does not make you a bad athlete. One bad grade does not make you stupid. Kids sometimes get caught up in the immediate emotion and lose sight of the broader perspective. Take the time to talk through their emotion and expose a larger view than just right now.

4. Model positive self-talk toward yourself and others.

Monitor how you speak to yourself and how you speak about others. Let your kids hear you being encouraging and uplifting regarding your own shortcomings and those of others.

5. Correct the record.

If you hear your child or yourself make a statement that is defining like “I am stupid,” correct that statement—“You are not stupid, you made an A on your history test. Some subjects are just harder than others.”

6. Touch base with school.

Get a perspective from others who are around you son/daughter to learn if they are experiencing the same interactions. You may learn that they are not hearing those things. This will give you more encouragement to reassure your child or may point out they need more reassurance at home. Or it may indicate a need to address underlying self-esteem or other issues.

7. Don't be afraid to seek professional help if a behavior is persistent or interferes with mood and daily functioning.

A professional can help do a mental health check up to make sure that other issues are not underlying and can help establish some healthy coping skills.