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The Power of Self-Efficacy: Helping Your Children Believe in Themselves

by Danielle Gándola

When I told my family that I had been invited to join my college's student editorial board, we all looked at each other, smiled, then broke into laughter—including me. The irony of this news was apparent as we all knew that I felt writing to be my academic weakness and had often complained about it.

In high school, writing paralyzed me—an all-nighter was inevitable whenever an essay was due. During my freshman year of college, the all-nighters continued, and I turned in my final research paper for first-year English only 50% complete because I was so overwhelmed by it. Though dreading the required advanced writing class for my major, I finally signed up for it, only to drop it one-third of the way into the semester. Then, fast forward to the next semester when to my surprise, I not only completed the class, but I earned the highest grade and was invited to join the highly selective student editorial board. What changed? I finally came to realize that what was really holding me back all that time was not a lack of ability but a lack of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy refers to “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.”¹ Put simply, self-efficacy is confidence in your ability to succeed or accomplish a goal. This idea was introduced by world-renowned psychologist, Albert Bandura. He suggested that our personal self-efficacy can immensely impact our realization of success, perhaps even more than our actual capabilities.²

Even from an early age, far too many let opportunities slide by or neglect to chase their potential, often with a lack of self-efficacy as the root of their problem.³ Consider the dream of becoming a concert pianist, of running a marathon, or in my case, of tackling a high school research paper. If you expect to fail before you even start, there's little motivation to attempt the climb.⁴ In contrast, if you

expect success, you'll be much more likely to invest the needed effort.

Bandura explained that self-efficacy can “influence the courses of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize.”¹

Clearly self-efficacy is important in succeeding in difficult challenges. In my case, my father provided a source of

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encouragement that supported me until I gained a sense of my own self-efficacy. I remember many a night when he slept on the couch next to me so I could wake him for needed help while writing a paper late into the night. This simple act gave me the support and safety net that I needed to continue working

when I lacked confidence. Eventually, I came to develop the self-efficacy needed to face those same daunting tasks on my own. So how can parents instill self-efficacy in their children? Here are four ideas to consider:

Mastery Experiences

It may seem ironic that I was more successful in my advanced writing class than I was in my first-year English class. I can attribute this growth to the approach of my advanced writing course, which required us to only tackle one step at a time. Each assignment I successfully completed enhanced my skillset and gave me greater confidence in my ability to complete the project as a whole. Accomplishing tasks in small increments can increase self-efficacy by providing evidence that success is within our control.⁵ As we master small steps and learn the

fundamentals, we grow our confidence to tackle larger tasks in the future.

Parents can help their children set realistic, short-term goals so that they can experience many small successes.⁶ Over time, these accomplishments will build their confidence and enable them to strive to achieve more daunting goals. During this process, parents need to allow their children to work through challenges and to do as much as they can alone. Guiding them through the inevitable setbacks and disappointments will help them learn that with resilience they can problem-solve and get through adversity. By contrast, overprotective parenting appears to hinder the development of self-efficacy, according to research.⁷

Social Persuasion

When others, especially parents, encourage and express confidence in us, we are better prepared to overcome self-doubt and fear. This encouragement, referred to as social persuasion,⁵ can be that extra push we need to feel motivated and confident enough to move forward. I can still hear my dad's words ringing in my head, "You got this." Those stirring words rung out each time I was ready to give up on writing a high school paper. In those times when I doubted myself, I was able to lean on his belief in me. As he gently reminded me of the many times I had persevered and succeeded, I felt a renewal of confidence that gave me the impetus to continue forward. When it comes to parenting, not all praise is equal in

building self-efficacy. Offering empty or dishonest praise, even if well-intended, can lead children to discredit the praise because they discern it is not genuine.⁶ Parents can avoid this situation by not overinflating their words of praise.⁸ In addition, research demonstrates that it is important to praise efforts that leads to progress.⁹ This specific praise acknowledges determined effort and helps children realize that as they persist and even change strategies, they will find that this process is yielding success. Thus, the child's discouraging thoughts of "I'm just not good enough" is minimized through self-efficacy.

Social Modeling

We also build self-efficacy through the observation of the efforts and successes of others, sometimes called social modeling.⁵ Watching others attain their goals helps us believe we can attain ours as well.¹⁰ Social models, including parents, can demonstrate effective skills and strategies for accomplishing tasks.¹¹ In high school, I was surprised and impressed at how well my mom taught an entire homeschool course on World War 1—I knew that this was not her area of expertise. But I watched as she dug into the topic, researched, and prepared for the course, which ultimately allowed her to teach authoritatively on the subject. For me, this demonstrated a pattern to follow when approaching an unfamiliar task.

Parents can mentor their children by leading by example. Children are constantly soaking up information as they watch others, and parents are a top source of this observational knowledge. Parents can share their goals with their children and their plans to achieve them, vocalize their setbacks, and share ways they have overcome them. As children see their parents persevere through obstacles, they will come to believe that they can do the same.⁶

Physiological and Emotional States

Our emotional and physical states impact how we view ourselves and our abilities, which can in turn impact our self-efficacy.¹¹ Some days we feel we are on the top of the world and that we can accomplish anything; other times we feel down and discouraged in our pursuits. Being able to manage stresses, moods, and emotions allows us to feel more control over our situations.⁵

Parents can help their children build self-efficacy by teaching them how to cope with stress and regulate their mood.² Sometimes,

Photo by Miguel Bruna on Unsplash

when I was visibly stressed while doing homework, my dad would suggest an ice cream break to ease the tension. Other times, he would help me to recognize when I had done enough and that I would be better off if I put the project on hold for the night.

Leading psychologist Daniel Goleman suggests that emotional intelligence may determine success even more than one's IQ. He stated, "People who are emotionally adept—who know and manage their own feelings well . . . are at an advantage in any domain of life." He added: "People with well-developed emotional skills are also more likely to be content and effective in their lives, mastering the habits of mind that foster their own productivity."¹² Parents can encourage emotional awareness by helping their children notice physical cues, such as butterflies in their stomach or a clenched jaw, that may signal an underlying emotion. Emotion coaching¹³ can then help children to understand and manage these emotions.

Conclusion

Through my own experience with learning to write, I can certainly vouch for the important role that parents can play in building self-efficacy in their children. Perhaps building self-efficacy is one of the best ways for parents to prepare their children for life's current and future uncertainties. My journey in facing writing challenges is not yet over—I'm sure fears will continue to arise. But the self-efficacy I have developed with so much support has allowed me to face this experience and will allow me to face many future challenges with perseverance and confidence. As my dad often aptly reminded me, "The hike to the top of a mountain is made up of a thousand individual steps."

Danielle Gándola is from Rocklin, California, and is currently studying human development at BYU. She has a passion for working with children and youth and hopes to one day become a social worker.

Endnotes

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¹¹ Bandura, A. (n.d.). *Self-efficacy*. [University of Kentucky](#).

¹² Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam (p. 36).

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