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Building confidence: Expert suggests ways parents can help their kids gain self-esteem

By Carma Wadley Deseret Morning News

Raising children is an art not a science, according to Dr. Jenn Berman. Few things can be seen or handled in terms of black and white. There are few hard-and-fast rules that apply to every child in every situation. "There aren't many absolutes. All parents can do is try to do their best. How you parent depends on the needs of your children, and those needs vary from child to child."

Berman, the mother of 16-month-old twins and a licensed marriage, child and family therapist in private practice in Los Angeles, is the author of a new book on parenting called "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Children" (New World Library, \$14.95). The book is filled with helpful tips and research-based information stretching from "A is for Apple" (building a healthy relationship with food) to "Z is for Getting ZZZ's" (helping your child get a good night's sleep), with topics such as raising down-to-earth children, decision-making, teaching children about love, managing money, sibling rivalry, dealing with the effects of television and much more in between.

The book is built around topics about which Berman has received a lot of questions, she said in a telephone interview from her L.A. office. Those questions have come not only in her practice but also from appearances on a variety of television shows, including "Oprah" and "The Today Show," and through a parenting column she writes for Los Angeles Family magazine.

"A lot of trial and error is involved in parenting," she said. "And that's scary for parents, because their children are the most important things they have. Nothing is more important than the wellbeing of the children."

And yet, many parents get so caught up in making their kids happy short-term, they forget to look at long-term issues, she said. A child who is never dissatisfied, who gets everything he wants, will not grow up to meet life head-on.

"Many parents make the mistake of thinking that raising a happy child means gratifying her every whim immediately. But sometimes raising a happy child means making your child unhappy in the short-term in order to teach long-term values, such as delayed gratification, manners and impulse control," Berman said. "If you give kids all they want, you don't get happy kids, you get entitled kids who think they deserve it all and someone else will clean up their messes."

The challenge for parents is to strike the right balance between freedom and boundaries, "and that takes time, experience and patience. But the rewards will be worth it: a confident, thriving child."

A lot of being a parent involves saying no, she said. "Parents have to be able to tolerate unhappiness. They have to remember that their biggest role is not to make children happy, but to teach them."

Children become happy and confident when they feel heard and understood, when they have consistent boundaries, Berman said. "Truly listening to their children is one of the most important things parents can do," she said. "That means not making assumptions about what you are hearing. That means not projecting what you want to hear. It means listening to your kids responsively; truly hearing what they say." That's a huge gift to children, she said, and helps them feel heard, understood and valued. Equally important is always "saying what you mean and meaning what you say." That's not always an easy thing to do, she said. Maybe you've told your child he can't throw his ball in the house or he will lose it. So, you come home from work one day, and your son is throwing the ball in the house. He's not hitting anything or breaking anything. But if you say, "that's OK, just don't do it again," you are sending your child the wrong message, Berman said. "You are teaching your child that the rules don't apply to him. And the last thing you want is a child who thinks the rules don't apply."

One part of setting boundaries and helping children develop confidence is helping them deal with fears. Childhood can be a scary place, especially as children learn more about their world and

begin to test their independence. "Children whose parents are able to read their distress signals and offer comfort tend to do better than those whose parents minimize their feelings," Berman said.

Often parents think that if they acknowledge their children's fears, that will make the fears worse, but the opposite is true, she said. Children whose parents respond to their fears, however silly they may seem, will grow up confident that they can find help in times of distress and will be better able to develop their own coping skills.

Try to normalize, not minimize, your child's fears, she advised. "Share how you have overcome similar fears in the past. Come up with ideas together that might help. Encourage, but never force, children to try to do new things. And when your child takes brave steps, reward that behavior with praise".

Another part of building confidence is building self-esteem, which is so important, Berman said. It relates to everything else. "Self-esteem helps children cope with the world. It helps them live up to their potential, to not be afraid to fail, to be secure in who they are, to explore what they need to become what they want to become."

Parenting in today's world is not easy, Berman said. And parents will make mistakes. Just remember, she advised, you don't have to be the perfect parent. You do need to be a conscious parent who is accountable for your own imperfections and who consistently shows your child that he is loved.

"If your child knows that he can count on you to be there for him and to validate his thoughts and dreams, then you are on the right track."

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Inserts to the article "Building Confidence Expert suggest ways parents can help their kids gain self-esteem"

Ways you can help your child have greater self-esteem

1. Doing housework together
2. Driving your kids to school
3. Reading you make a mistake.
- 4 , Bathing your kids
5. Sharing wash-up time
6. Standing in line at the market
7. Taking a walk together
8. Spending time together first thing in the morning
9. Working on a project together
10. Playing a game

Source: "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids" By Dr. Jenn Berman, New World Library.

Our culture largely chooses flash over substance. Kids today are encouraged to wear the "right" shoes, carry the coolest lunch box and wear designer clothes before they are even old enough to walk. Character development is being overlooked. Here are 10 of the most important characteristics for your child to develop:

1. Values and morals
2. The ability to delay gratification

3. Understanding and expectation of the consequences of his actions
4. Empathy toward others
5. A strong work ethic
6. A willingness to face consequences
7. The ability to learn from failures
8. An ability to take responsibility for mistakes
9. A tolerance for negative feedback
10. The ability to tolerate frustration

Source: "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids" by Dr. Jenn Berman, New World Library.

Set consistent rules. Don't announce a punishment you will not follow through on. Children need structure to feel safe. All rules should apply to all your children equally.

Create a calm and nonviolent home atmosphere. Children can thrive and learn to trust only when they feel safe.

Ask your child his opinions. Show your child you value his opinions by asking questions.

Spend focused time together. Children are sensitive to an adult's distracted mind. Turn off the television, put away the Blackberry and don't answer the phone for a few hours so you can spend focused time together.

Help your child find her passions. Allowing your child to engage in an activity that she enjoys will bolster her self-identity and help her to develop a sense of mastery.

Apologize if you say something mean or hurtful to your child. Show your child how to make amends so that he knows how to do it himself. You don't have to be perfect, and your child will benefit from seeing how you behave when you make a mistake.

Source: "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids" by Dr. Jenn Berman, New World Library.

Give honest and specific praise. Offering this kind of praise helps your child feel seen and appreciated. Reframe our child's idiosyncrasies. Your child looks to you to know how to perceive herself. If you let your "loud child who asks too many questions" know you see her as "passionate and curious" instead, she may see herself differently.

Show up for your kid. Show up when you say you will, and make sure to attend important events such as school plays, sporting events and piano recitals.

Leave your child notes. When your child is old enough to read, leave her notes or letters encouraging her and reminding her that you love her.

The preceding information was included in article "Building confidence" by Carma Wadley, Deseret Morning News Feb. 4, 2008. "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids" by Dr. Jenn Berman, New World Library. Copyright by Deseret Morning News. May be used for educational purposes, not to be sold for commercial gain.