

Building Confidence in Your Children and Grandchildren

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An aspect of leadership that has intrigued me for years is the interplay between competence and confidence. “Competence” is the ability to execute specific skills. My clients typically hire me to help them enhance their competence and build skills in their future organizational leaders.

“Confidence” is a more elusive quality. How does an individual acquire (or enhance) his or her confidence? I gained some insight recently in dealing with one of my very confident clients.

We discussed his obvious comfort (confidence) in dealing with a wide variety of circumstances and his optimistic approach in facing new challenges. He shared some insights about his upbringing that stimulated me to write this article. I want to share (and internalize) what I learned in that conversation.

You love your kids and grandkids, don't you? I sure love mine! Because we know a lot and they know very little, we love helping them grow by building their knowledge and skills (competence). We assess their growth by observing their achievements, the “what” that is the outcome of their efforts. (My two-year old grandson loves to triumphantly exclaim, “I did it!”) As they gain skill, we say “Good job!” and their confidence in their abilities (competence) grows.

Whether child or adult, we all routinely face new situations. We're likely confident in facing the challenges when we know we have the skills that will be required. But what happens when we face a new situation that we've never encountered before? Or what if we just suffered a huge failure, and the results we envisioned so clearly seem exceptionally elusive?

Confidence in these unfamiliar situations is what reveals real leadership. Can we be confident in embracing the process of being challenged, even if we aren't sure what content may be required?

Some people, like my client mentioned above, seem so naturally confident in approaching those unknown situations. How can we build that kind of confidence in our kids and grandkids?

Maybe one of the most important concepts we can teach our kids is to “figure it out.” That is, perhaps we should be teaching our children that they have the capacity to creatively generate options when they face a tough challenge. And they have the capability to choose from among those options one apparently viable possibility that will likely deliver the outcome they desire.

We should then compliment the child for taking action to resolve the situation. When the dust has settled and the outcome has been attained, we should ask the child to reflect on “What did you do well?” and “What might you do differently next time you face a situation like this?”

The child may not recognize that he or she was successful in figuring out how to deal with the situation. We should point that out and celebrate the act, even if the outcome is not very remarkable. Notice that this is contrary to our natural tendency, which is to celebrate and reward if the quality of the outcome is good and criticize if the result is less desirable.

We should be rewarding the child's effort. The more difficult the situation (and maybe the more creative the action taken), the greater we should celebrate.

As we consider with the child what he or she did well and what could be done differently next time, we should pause and point out the process that occurred for the child. We should emphasize that he or she DID think through the situation, made a choice, and executed the decision. That is, he or she took a big step in developing the confidence to handle all kinds of tough future situations.

Instead of focusing on the content of this particular situation, we should help the child see the process that has taken place. By focusing on “you figured it out,” we reinforce the development of the child's innate assurance that “I can confidently address just about any situation that might come up!”

That way of thinking is so very different from what my parents did with me, and even different from what I did with my child. However, I intend to take that approach--affirming the “figure it out” effort--with my grandchild as often as I can. Is that something you might consider, too?