

# Building confident children

Raising a confident, competent child is no easy task, but HSE psychologist Peadar Maxwell tells **Margaret Hawkins** about strategies that parents can learn to help children develop the emotional and social skills they need

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**W**hat core life skills, values and behaviours are you teaching your children? Have you ever thought about what they are? Psychologist Peadar Maxwell specialises in child, adolescent and family psychology and believes that parents have a huge amount of power within us to help our children to be all that they can be.

"The foundations for children's success at school, in their relationships and in life in general are laid down when they are very young," he says, "but parents have an important role from infancy to teenage years in encouraging their children to develop the life skills that will lead to them being confident and competent."

He lists the six "building blocks" to a child achieving this:

- 1 Showing respect for others.
  - 2 Being considerate.
  - 3 Having good communication and social skills.
  - 4 Having healthy self-esteem.
  - 5 Becoming a good problem solver.
  - 6 Becoming independent.
- "Having these skills will enable them to develop confidence, feel more capable and reach their potential, whatever that is, and to get along with others in life which is so incredibly important," he says.

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Peadar Maxwell's approach is based on the Trip P Positive Parenting Program developed by Prof Matthew R. Sanders in the University of Queensland. Peadar was speaking at Wexford Library as part of the Healthy Ireland initiative. Check out the Healthy Ireland books at your local library.

## WORDS OF LIFE

God our Saviour  
"will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

I Timothy ch. 2 v 4



### 1 SHOWING RESPECT TO OTHERS

Peadar says the reality is that children are more likely to get on with people when they are polite, but how do we achieve all that?

#### ENCOURAGING POLITENESS

"The best approach is by speaking politely ourselves," he says. "If we model using our voice as a way to demonstrate respect to others, perhaps by holding back on blaming or using bad language or name calling, we set a good example for our children."

Prompting or reminding children to ask properly for things they want is also very important, along with not giving them what they ask for if they whine, demand or use an unpleasant voice.

"This will accidentally reward your child for doing the wrong thing. That is the trap we fall into."

Peadar believes that parents should direct more energy toward praising children for doing something good rather than focusing huge energy on when they've done something wrong.

"That's because the behaviour that gets the most attention is the behaviour that is likely to continue," he says.

#### ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO CO-OPERATE

Children need to be able to stop doing whatever they are doing straight away when parents ask them to, without complaining, and listen to what is being said.

"That's whether it is coming off an iPad or switching off the TV when dinner is ready. Those instructions carry over to lots of things, to learning in school, or to following safety instructions. They also need to be able to take turns, share and observe rules of a game."

### DON'T RAISE YOUR VOICE

He advises staying calm and not raising your voice when you want your child to do something. Don't yell from the next room, for example. Instead:

- Get close (within an arm's length).
- Use your child's name.
- Give the instruction in a calm, firm voice – shut the game down, please.
- Pause briefly (five seconds) without saying anything else.
- Praise your children if they do as you ask straight away.
- Repeat the instruction once if your child ignores the request, or protests.
- If your child doesn't do as you ask, use a suitable back-up consequence like five-minute time out.

A technique called directive discussion can also be used.

"Talk to your child about why it is important not to bang doors, for example. If they do so again, use their name and ask them to restate the rule about not banging the door and why it shouldn't be done. When they repeat it and close the door properly give them the thumbs up and say, 'That's so much better.'"

He points out that the word "discipline" comes from the Greek word "to teach". "It's about teaching skills. Only repeat the instruction once. If we repeat it five times it is nagging. There should be little consequences if they don't respond but they shouldn't involve the withdrawal of food."

### 2 BEING CONSIDERATE

The relationship skill of taking other people's feelings and perspective into consideration is important in childhood and in adulthood and children find it easier to make friends if they have been taught to do this.

"Being helpful and friendly such as

welcoming a new child in class or putting dirty clothes in the wash basket are skills that are important. Not interrupting and asking others what they would like to do is important too. Again, it's back to parents modelling being considerate themselves and avoiding being critical of others," he says.

"If children hear parents being critical they can learn that it is OK to make hurtful comments. If you point out others' good points, your child will see the good in others too."

#### LEARNING TO APOLOGISE, NOT EVALUATE

Learning to apologise is important too. "Children learn through the consequences of their actions and should apologise if they do something hurtful."

Peadar advises parents to not get into the situation of evaluating the apology, however.

"Saying that you don't think they mean the apology is a risky place to go. A sincere apology from a child can look insincere, they can giggle or get nervous and be mortified. We could accidentally teach them not to apologise if we get into evaluating whether it is sincere or not."

When it comes to children hurting other children, there should be consequences like a time out. "It is important we let them know we are treating aggressive behaviour seriously."

### 3 HAVING GOOD COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Children with good social skills get on well with others and have fewer disagreements. Talking about what friendship means is important, as is inviting your children's friends to your house, he believes.

"Expect appropriate behaviour when visiting or from visitors also.



Correct the visitor politely if they do something unacceptable for example, 'Sean, in our house we don't use that word'. Or you explain that playdates in your house happen in the garden or downstairs, not in the bedroom. Talk to your child before the visit about the house rules."

If there is a row with a friend, Peadar suggests listening to the whole story calmly.

"Don't show horror or they will censor it. Let them tell it, afterwards discuss it with them, asking how the row escalated. Explain the consequences – apologising to the friend, and to his parents, perhaps buying new glasses if they're broken. Praise your child for playing well also if he has done so."

#### IF YOUR CHILD HURTS OTHERS

Peadar advises working with the school if the hurt is happening in school.

"This is a tough situation for you to be in, if your child is being hurt or is hurting or taking things. It is difficult but try not to be defensive. Listen to the teacher about what happened because it is a really important learning opportunity.

"If we get defensive, ie my child didn't do it, we are going to miss out on the opportunity to help our child to correct their behaviour and get along with others in the future."

#### 4 HAVING HEALTHY SELF-ESTEEM

Healthy self-esteem comes from a child believing good things about themselves.

"It's not feeling that we are the star but that we are able to manage in life and be liked and problem solve. Low self-esteem can come from parents making unfavourable comparisons

with siblings, from neglect, abuse, parents arguing frequently, lack of self-care and hygiene and lack of physical activity."

Routine, affection, encouragement and helping your children to be a good friend will help them see their strengths.

"Help them to see their strengths too and how they've improved at tasks/studies and encourage them to express their ideas."

"This makes them feel valued. Encourage laughter too. It is an emotional release. Children who feel good about themselves laugh spontaneously."

He points out that grooming skills are also very important.

"Being able to take care of their own appearance is so important because other children pick up on the smell of urine or yoghurt on a jumper or tossed hair or a zip not fastened properly and can give the child feedback that makes them feel bad about themselves."

Regular exercise is also important. It is nature's anti-depressant, he says.

"Find a sport they are into, even a sport that your family hasn't tried. Exercise helps children to sleep better and helps regulate their mood and appetite. Practise with them how to climb, how to balance, how to kick a ball so that they can survive at birthday parties or at PE."

#### 5 BECOMING A PROBLEM SOLVER

This is a vital skill to pass on to our children and is related to personal development and self-esteem.

"What happens if a child forgets his lunch? What can he do? If he feels he can solve little problems like this his self-esteem will go up and he will apply that skill to academic learning and to hobbies, to game plans in sport or to putting on a drama where there is no money for a big set. It will also help in social skills and relationships."

#### 6 BECOMING INDEPENDENT

Gradual independence is important in preparing children for later life and as they become more independent their confidence also develops.

"Increasing independence will be obvious in self-care skills like brushing their teeth and showering and tidying up their things, getting ready for school and cooking under supervision."

#### DON'T DO TOO MUCH FOR YOUR CHILD

One trap we should avoid, however, is doing too much for our child.

"Don't take over and do everything for him or her. Children learn when they have opportunities to practise their skills. Also, don't give too many reminders for getting ready for school or they may only get ready after repeated reminders."

Prompt your child to learn the morning routine and provide a back-up reward such as an after school activity they enjoy. Once the routine is established, gradually reduce prompts and rewards." **EL**