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Raising a 'Can Do' Kid

By Anne Laufe



"You can't spoil a child with love or nurturance, you do it when you don't give them boundaries."

— Valerie Correa

"I think I can, I think I can," the Little Blue Engine said to herself as she chugged up the mountain, pulling the train full of toys and dolls and food behind her.

Have you ever wished your own child were more like that, confident and optimistic in the face of challenges? What is it that keeps the Little Blue Engine huffing and puffing up that hill, believing in herself and her ability to help others? Not once does she waver from her mission; not a single doubt enters her mind; we never hear her second guess herself, or question her abilities, as some of our kids, and indeed we adults, might.

With *The Little Engine That Could* being reissued this fall, we decided to ask a few experts what we can do to help our kids gain self-confidence – or in some cases, retain it, as there are those kids who just seem to be born with a "can do" attitude. How can we raise kids who believe in themselves, who feel competent and capable and can generalize these feelings to new tasks and experiences?

Relationships are Key

Psychologist Valerie Correa, a marriage and family therapist who practices in Vancouver, Wash., says kids develop self-esteem through their relationships. According to Correa, the three main areas of influence for kids are parents and other family members, peers (including church and other community groups) and school. Together they form a kind of triangle that shapes how children start to see themselves in other people's eyes.

According to Correa, who has worked as a therapist for 15 years, kids must have strong family, peer and school relationships if they are to have good self-esteem. It's important for parents to coordinate

all three worlds for their children, and really listen to what's happening in each.

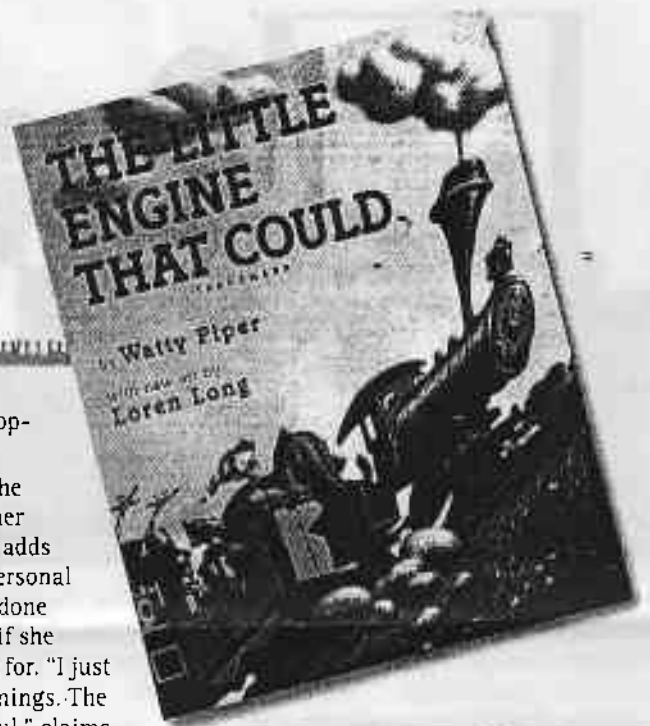
If a child feels heard, if they think that parents feel their small dramas are important, then they themselves will feel important. "Sometimes we don't think they're important and we show them that," Correa says. "Little dismissals over and over can affect self-esteem."

Correa says that certain activities can really reinforce self-esteem. She notes that camps are great for kids who have good social skills, but for those who don't, they can be a nightmare. These kids might benefit from other physical or academic group activities; consider math club, chess club or karate as well as more traditional school offerings.

Being part of a group teaches kids to show up on time, to take responsibility for being part of the team and for finishing the season. It gives kids an opportunity to become part of a community, something larger than themselves. Correa says that community service, which is required by more and more schools, is valuable in part for the same reasons.

In addition to group activities, kids benefit in myriad ways from having a close friend. "Research shows that having one friend helps them get through a lot," Correa says. Parents can help nurture this by inviting their child's friend over for dinner, and providing time outside of scheduled activities for the relationship to grow. And while parents shouldn't step in and solve problems in the friendship, they can coach their child and help them negotiate rough spots.

"When they're older, teens like to evaporate and disappear with their friends," Correa says. To stay in touch with teens, parents should make their homes open and welcoming to the whole crowd. Feed them, hang out in the kitchen, really talk to them, she ad-



vises. "Most kids like it when they can hang out at their house, even if (the parents) are a little weird or quirky, if the friends accept them, then the kids accept them more."

Relationships with grandparents and adult family friends also help a child feel safe and important. When your co-workers at the company picnic ask your child about the activities she's involved in, this helps her form a positive sense of self.

And at all times, parents need to provide support to their children. Correa recommends spending time with kids on homework, which can be very stressful for some kids. "Don't just say 'come to me when you have a problem', praise them when they get things (right) as well," she says. Just being there on the periphery, doing the dishes or reading the newspaper while your child does his homework, can provide him with the sense of security he will need to tackle difficult tasks.

Finally, Correa says that because parents are so busy, when they are available they try too hard to compensate for the times they aren't there. They may buy their kids extravagant items or indulge them in expensive activities on the weekend. What kids really need is uninterrupted quality time with their parents, when cell phones and televisions and computers are turned off, and parents can really listen and pay attention. Just 15 minutes a night of focused time with kids is beneficial to them. "You can't spoil a child with love or nurturance, you do it when you don't give them boundaries," Correa reminds us.

Examples, Expectations and Education

While not a trained child development professional, Linda Godson has the wisdom of experience on her side. Godson, coordinator of the heritage language program at Portland State University, has six children and 13 grandchildren. She says that examples, expectations and education were her guiding principles when she was raising her kids in the 1960's and 70's. "I was just trying to keep everyone alive and healthy," Godson

says. "I wasn't into child development theories."

Necessity drove many of the decisions she made in raising her children, says Godson, but she adds that she's always believed in personal responsibility and might have done most of the same things, even if she hadn't had six children to care for. "I just expected my kids to do these things. The expectations are really powerful," claims Godson.

Responsibility came early for Godson's children. "When a kid turned 8, he got on the job chart," Godson recalls. There were five jobs on the chart, including making and cleaning up after dinner; feeding the dogs; cleaning the bathrooms; vacuuming; and taking out the garbage. (But Godson was no slave driver; every six weeks, each child also got a "free" week.)

If the kids didn't do what they were supposed to, Godson didn't spend a lot of time figuring out the perfect punishment. "The big key is natural consequences. Just to let them happen," says Godson, "sometimes it's hard to watch." She emphasizes that when you give your children a lot of independence, you have to also give them the knowledge to succeed and the skills to be safe. An example of this is the swim lessons and first aid classes Godson insisted her children take, because they lived on a lake.

"Someone once asked me what makes a good mother," Godson says. "I told them you have to be a good person yourself, be a good example. My kids learned more from what I did than from what I said. I was a very independent person too. They saw this and learned from this."

Celebrate Kids' Achievements

Dan Prince, coordinator of Multnomah Education Service District Outdoor School, is well aware of the profound influence his program has on its graduates. At Outdoor School, sixth grade students spend four nights and five days away from home, with

Recommended Books

The Little Engine That Could by Watty Piper, with new art by Loren Long (Philomel Books, Publication date: Sept. 27, 2005). The classic tale about believing in oneself.

Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes (Scholastic, 2000). This humorous book by the author of *Lily's Plastic Purse* shows how friendship can help ease a young child's anxiety.

Frog and Toad Are Friends by Arnold Lobel (Harper & Row, 1970). This series celebrates friendships, how they help us grow and bring out the best in us.

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney (Viking Press, 1982). *Miss Rumphius* follows her dreams of traveling to faraway places, living by the sea and making the world more beautiful.

Miss Bridie Chose a Shovel by Leslie Connor (Houghton Mifflin, 2004). When *Miss Bridie* leaves her native country for America, she brings a shovel with her; it proves to be the perfect tool to help her carve out her new life.

The Trumpet of the Swan by E.B. White (Harper Collins, 1970). Unable to speak like other swans, Lewis finds his voice through a trumpet given to him by his father.

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Linda Godson's six "can do" kids are pictured here:
Back row: George, Michael and Joel
Front row: Matthew, Julia and Laura

Profile of a 'Can Do' Family

Linda Godson's story of raising six kids in the '60s and '70s is a prime example of how to impart a "can do" attitude to your children. "I was talking with one of my daughters and she said I must have done something right, because all six are married, all have jobs, all have children and all are still friends with me," Godson said recently.

Godson acknowledges that she didn't seek the advice of experts on what strategies to follow. She relied mainly on lessons from her own parents, common sense and necessity to steer her children to adulthood. Godson, a "can do" woman herself, says that her own parents had very high expectations of her. Those early experiences likely helped her forge ahead when her first husband died, leaving her with three children under the age of 4. Godson returned to school to study computer programming, met her second husband and went on to have three more children. After her kids had grown up and left home, Godson again went back to school, earning a Ph. D. in linguistics at age 67.

At 8 years of age, Godson's kids became part of the family workforce, sharing jobs like making dinner, cleaning bathrooms and taking out garbage. They also started doing their own laundry. "They each had their own laundry basket with instructions inside on how to do it," Godson says. Because Godson had to be at work before the kids left the house, they were responsible for getting to the school bus on time, and remembering their books and homework. They were expected to take care of each other, as well as taking care of chores and physical belongings.

Godson's fifth child, Laura Godson-Bush, now 39, lives in Vancouver with her husband and 15-month-old son. She

says that the many opportunities she had for independence while she was growing up led to her feelings of positive self-esteem.

One such experience was doing the weekly grocery shopping. "By the time that I was 12, I was doing all the grocery shopping for the whole family," Godson-Bush recalls. Every Saturday, her mother would give her the week's grocery money. "I made up the menu and grocery list for the week. Mom told me that anything I didn't spend I got to keep." This taught Godson-Bush to clip coupons, plan menus around sale items, and manage money.

There were times when Godson-Bush felt her mother expected too much. On her eighth birthday, when she received her own laundry basket, she says she was devastated. "I was crying and I told my mother she didn't love me, but she said it was precisely because she loved me that she gave it to me," Godson-Bush says.

Despite the times when she didn't like having so much responsibility, Godson-Bush says that throughout her childhood she was also proud of it. As a teen, she was the one her friends turned to when they didn't know how to run the washing machine or cook a meal. "I'm still, among my peers, much more responsible," she says.

Godson, looking back over what seems like several lifetimes to her, acknowledges that her three older children probably had too much responsibility thrust on them too early. But for the most part, she thinks her kids appreciated the responsibility they had. Being given those experiences early in life – and having a role model like their mom – led to all six of her kids becoming "can do" adults.

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kids from other schools, learning about the environment and how to get along with strangers. Many students return in high school to act as "student leaders" – the counselors who sleep in cabins with the sixth graders and shepherd them through the week's activities.

"A lot of people call Outdoor School a 'teacher factory,'" Prince says, because so many of their student leaders go on to work with children, in positions ranging from classroom teachers to education director at Tryon Creek to program director at The Oregon Zoo.

The success of Outdoor School begins with the younger children, according to Prince. Kids who may hide in the shadows of a traditional classroom or who may have reputations as troublemakers, often shine in this unique environment, where observation and scientific exploration are emphasized. The child who knows that snakes aren't slimy or who can spot a butterfly camouflaged in the wildflowers will suddenly find that her skills are valued here. "Being able to acknowledge kids' strengths is something we try to make a hallmark of the program," Prince says.

When it comes to the high school students, Prince says that immense amounts of trust go hand in hand with immense amounts of support. Adult supervisors work closely with the teens, providing constructive feedback and always celebrating their successes.

Prince, who did his master's research on why high school boys chose to return to Outdoor School as counselors, found that boys liked the challenge of the job and also enjoyed the camaraderie with their peers. "They liked that it was tough and they survived," Prince reports, "and they liked the 'brotherhood' with their peers. When I was an adolescent boy, it was all about competition rather than collaboration, but these guys really talked about helping each other out."

Prince says there's something about challenges and achievement, and celebrating those achievements, that draws kids back season after season.

"I think I can, I think I can..."

Helping kids form positive relationships in the different spheres of their lives, giving them the skills they need to succeed, having high expectations, and celebrating their successes are all essential to helping kids develop positive self-esteem. And while you're at it, give yourself a pat on the back; the better we parents feel about ourselves, the better able we are to love and support our children.

Anne Laufe is a Portland writer and mom.