



## CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

# How to Help Kids Who Are Too Hard on Themselves

Bolstering self-critical children who tend to talk themselves down

Katherine Martinelli

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**W**e hear kids say negative things about themselves all the time: “I’m so stupid!” “Nobody likes me.” And, of course, “I’m fat.” Or “I’m ugly.” Sometimes these things are throwaway lines, or fishing for reassurance. They may be harmless. But what experts call negative self-talk can also reflect an unhealthy tendency in kids to think the worst of themselves, and that can lead to—or be a sign of—something more serious.

## What is self-talk?

Self-talk is essentially our inner monologue, explains Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. It can be a way of narrating what is happening around you, practicing language, and guiding yourself through a task.

*“In some cases, self-critical thought can be an indication of lack of resilience or ‘grit’ ”*



While self-talk is often constructive, it can also go the other way. We all engage in self-critical behavior from time to time, and it isn't an immediate cause for concern. But it's useful to think about why your child might be talking herself down, and when it might reflect a problem.

## Globalized thinking

Kids often make statements about themselves that reflect “all or none thinking,” explains Lisa Brown, PsyD, a private practitioner and psychologist at the Rodeph Sholom Day School in New York. For example, when a child doesn't do well in one soccer game and exclaims, “I stink at soccer!” When this kind of globalized thinking persists, she says, it “can affect how children think and feel about themselves in general.”

## Perfectionism

“Children who set impossibly high standards for themselves,” says Dr. Brown, “are prone to engage in negative self-talk.” These perfectionists can be so hard on themselves that they run themselves down trying to reach their goals.

## Too cool for school

Sometimes the self-deprecating “I’m *so* going to fail that test” or “I’m so fat” can be a form of social protection. For older kids in particular, “the social sphere becomes really important” says Dr. Busman. In certain social circles it may not be cool to be smart, and obsessing over appearances may be a way to fit in with the popular kids. Or maybe the child is trying to beat others to the punch by making negative statements first.

## Attention-seeking

“Sometimes,” says Dr. Brown, “children may engage in negative self-talk, verbalized out loud, in an attempt to manipulate others or in an effort to get attention.” For example a child may try to guilt parents by talking about what a horrible child he is and how he deserves to be punished.

## Lack of resilience

In some cases, self-critical thought can be an indication of lack of resilience or “grit,” as some psychologists refer to it. “If children regularly respond to disappointments with negative self-talk that is out of proportion to the particular disappointments,” says Dr. Brown, “this can lead to avoiding certain experiences as well as a lack of motivation to persevere in the face of difficulties.”

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## Bullying

If a child is being picked on, it can be easy for her to internalize the insults

aimed at her. Shawna Palomo, mom to a 17-year-old daughter, says her daughter's negative self-talk emerged when she was 13. "They made fun of her," recalls Palomo. "After a while she would believe all the bad stuff her classmates were saying about her. She would always say how ugly she was." Her daughter complained that her lips and nose were too big, her hair too curly. "It's hard watching your child battle these demons," laments Palomo.

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## When to worry

In isolation, negative self-talk is natural and not cause for concern. But it can also be evidence of low self-esteem, a learning disability, anxiety, or depression.

Dr. Busman offers these signs to look out for:

- The negative self-talk is persistent and pervasive.
- It is not based in reality. For example your son gets invited to play dates but still frets that no one likes him, or he always aces spelling tests but remains anxious that he will fail.

- It is impacting a child's relationships or schoolwork.
- Your daughter's eating and/or sleeping patterns have changed.
- She's making persistent, vague "I don't feel well" statements in the absence of physical symptoms.

Palomo noticed many of these signs in her daughter as the negative self-talk led to depression. "She would not care about her appearance, then it went to the extreme where her appearance was *all* she cared about." She didn't do her homework, lost weight, and wanted to stay in bed all day.

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### **What parents can do to help**

Here are some ways to free children from negative thinking and steer them away from destructive self-talk:

#### **Listen and validate**

It can be tempting to ignore it when a kid first expresses negative feelings, but Dr. Busman says she "would recommend never just brushing off those kinds of comments, even if they're kind of silly or not based in any reality." Instead, offer a safe place for your child to come with concerns and try to find out what is going on.

#### **Offer a realistic approach**

Both Dr. Busman and Dr. Brown advise against battling critical self-talk with overly optimistic "**positive thinking**," and recommend a more realistic

approach. So if a child says she's sure no one will talk to her on her first day at a new school, you don't want to say, "The first day of school is going to be *great* and you're going to make a million friends." Instead, you might offer: "The first day of school might be a bit scary, but as you settle in you will likely make friends and grow to love it."

## Put it in context

Dr. Brown notes that adults can help by talking with kids in a way that "contextualizes their experience" and offers a "broader perspective." Help them identify specifically what upset them, she explains, or made them make such a self-critical statement, and acknowledge that one bad experience doesn't equate being the worst at something.

## Model realistic and positive self-talk

Try to stop saying self-critical things about yourself, too. Don't fixate on mistakes you've made, or worry out loud about your weight. We want to model positive self-esteem for our children. Dr. Busman also suggests offering stories from your own life to relate to your child. "Whether it's an embellished example or entirely factual," she says, "you're modeling non-anxious coping and more realistic self-talk."

## **Correct the record**

Dr. Brown also notes catching yourself in the midst of making a negative statement can create a valuable teachable moment. Say you burn something and yell in frustration, "I'm a terrible cook!" Continue the conversation in front of your child with something like "actually, I'm a pretty good cook most of the time, I just messed up this dish but I'm not going to let that stop me from cooking in the future."

## Touch base with school

If your child is in school, check in with his teachers about what you're hearing. Getting their perspective can help you see a more complete picture. Dr. Busman notes that this kind of information can also be useful later should you end up having a professional evaluation.

## Seek professional help

If the behavior is persistent and negatively impacting your child's life, or if it's linked to other troubling shifts in mood and behavior it might be time to obtain a **diagnostic evaluation** to help determine what is causing the problem. Dr. Busman calls this a "mental health check-up," and it can help pinpoint what is going on and how it can be treated.

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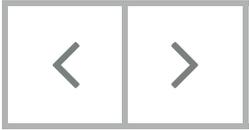
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*Katherine Martinelli is a journalist who has published internationally on a variety of topics including parenting, food, travel and education. She is also mom to an inquisitive toddler.*



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