



by Karen Stephens

# Self Esteem and Confidence Grow from Early Success

“I did it!”, “Watch what I can do!”, “Hey, look at this!”

Sound familiar? I hope so. These are words kids use to celebrate their growing confidence.

One of the best methods to build confidence and self esteem is to help children experience success. It really doesn't matter in what; it's just the experience of feeling competent in something that contributes to a positive self esteem.

Most of children's early successes are related to physical achievement. Remember your child's intent look of concentration as he first mastered rolling over? The look of delight, mixed with more than a little trepidation, as she took her first step? And how about the first time your child found the strength and coordination to climb out of the crib without your assistance? Ah, what a step toward independent mobility!

To help your child experience success, it's good to keep the term “developmental” in mind. It's a term you hear parenting writers, child care staff, school teachers, and doctors bandy about quite a lot.

Developmental refers to current skills and abilities a particular child possesses. All children — regardless of geographic location, income level, race, or culture — grow through predictable stages of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical development. What can vary significantly is the rate, or speed, at which individual children pass through each stage. In general, girls tend to develop a bit more quickly than boys; this is especially true in terms of learning to talk and read. But don't worry guys, we all know (and researchers have confirmed) that the male gender does catch up quickly.

Even within the same family, every child has his or her own rate of development. This is why it is unfair and misleading to compare siblings to each other, especially if siblings are of different genders. It's like comparing apples to oranges; not a good premise for evaluating children's individual progress.

By keeping individual activities developmental, parents and other caregivers can help set the stage for children's success. Developmental appropriateness means a task is not too easy or too hard for a child to accomplish.

When experiences are too simplistic, immature, or mundane, children become bored. Unchallenging activities often lead to a limited attention span because children are not motivated to stick with them. Children are naturally curious; they need stimulating activities to maintain their interest. If experiences don't keep them intellectually or physically engaged, they move quickly to another endeavor — often one considered to be *trouble making* by parents, teachers, and caregivers.

Experiences and activities for children should be challenging, but not too challenging. Activities that are out of the developmental reach of children prove to be frustrating and demoralizing. Children held accountable to inappropriate developmental expectations come to think of themselves as failures. A most extreme example of this was when a parent told me she was upset with her 15 month old for wetting the bed at night. Miraculously, the babe was staying dry in the daytime! Rather than leaving well enough alone, the

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mother expected dry nights, too. It simply was not a developmentally appropriate expectation. The child could not achieve dry nights, because it was physically out of her current physical abilities.

The process of getting to know the range of children's abilities is not easy. Those in my profession regularly interact with hundreds of different children. This gives us a good first hand sampling of children's *can dos* and *can't dos*.

For parents, astutely judging children's developmental levels can be harder. We are all growing up in smaller families; therefore, we have less chance to view our own parents raising children of varying ages. Many of us live far from extended family and have less opportunity to learn from interacting with nieces, nephews, or cousins. Despite these limited family resources, there are ways for parents to become familiar with the typical stages of child development.

Read books about child development to get a basic overview of typical experiences children can master. Karen Miller's recent revision of her book, *Ages and Stages* (Beltsville, MD: Telshare Publishing, 2001), is an easy to read reference that parents have given good reviews. Books by authors T. Berry Brazelton, Penelope Leach, and Stanley Greenspan are also popular.

While reading is helpful, nothing substitutes for actually interacting with children. First-hand experiences with children give patient, observant adults an ideal window into children's abilities. Parents with young children sometimes form play groups of same-aged children. This is one way to see what the range of "average" is.

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Parents utilizing child care have a ready-made child development observation site. Any good program encourages parents to visit any time of the day, for as long as the parent wishes. Take advantage of the invitation! You can keep an eye on the quality of your child care service while learning more about child development.

In the final analysis, the ability to help nurture children's self esteem and self confidence through expanding successes is an art. To be sure, knowing just how much, or how little, to expect from children keeps parents on their toes. After all, behavior expectations will change with each new developmental success. To respond sensitively, follow your children's lead and they will surely show you the way.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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