



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION



STUDENTS EXPERIENCING LOW SELF-COMPASSION OR LOW PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE

*This information is designed to help teachers respond to students who may need support. It is **not** intended to be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals. Additionally, it is important to consider the context of the situation, individual differences, and cultural and linguistic factors.*

Teachers are an important part of establishing and maintaining healthy environments for children to learn and grow. Teachers can help students who are less confident in themselves, or who are afraid to make a mistake, to build their feelings of self-compassion confidence. Teachers can also play an important role in referring students to professionals in the building who can be of assistance.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

- Self-esteem is the degree to which students feel valuable, satisfied with themselves, and worthy of respect.
- Perceived competence is a belief that one has skills in a particular area (e.g., math, spelling, science, art, peer relationships).
- Self-esteem and perceived competence are necessary for students to take risks in their learning and to bounce back after failure or adversity.
- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence leaves students doubting their ability to succeed, making them hesitant to engage in learning or take appropriate academic growth risks.
- Self-esteem is often built and buttressed through estimable acts and achievements—even small ones.

HOW MIGHT LOW SELF-ESTEEM BE EXPRESSED BY STUDENTS IN SCHOOL?

- Students may make self-disparaging comments such as, “I’m stupid,” “I can’t do this,” “I always do everything wrong,” “No one likes me,” etc.
- Students with low self-esteem may take blame for things that are not their fault or are out of their control, or they may try to control other children’s behavior to alleviate a sense of helplessness.
- Students may react to adversity by giving up, avoiding risks, disengaging from tasks, or turning off their cameras during virtual learning.
- Students may be reluctant to try new things or be unable to tolerate typical levels of frustration. They also may pretend they don’t care, clown around, be aggressive to cover up their lack of confidence, or log off from the virtual learning environment (VLE) abruptly.

Students may do very well for a period of time, then suddenly underperform. Students may be afraid their success was a fluke or be worried that expectations from others are suddenly too high.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

DO	DON'T
Give specific and genuine positive feedback on effort rather than outcome, when warranted. For example, "You made a lot of progress on that project," or, "The topic sentence of that paragraph is really strong."	Praise excessively or vaguely, or provide generic praise like, "Good job."
Point out concrete signs of progress, even if they are small.	Give repeated, general pep talks that include, "You can do it!"
Showcase accomplishments by displaying students' work in class or contacting parents to tell them how proud you are of the students' efforts.	Focus solely on suboptimal behaviors or performance.
Engage students in a conversation about their interests—and point out their skills to them—privately.	Address the student's low self-compassion publicly.
Engage the students' interests by setting them up for success: give them specific tasks at which they will excel, such as caring for the class pet, or running things to the front office. In a VLE, this could involve choosing music for the virtual classroom, posting a math question on the discussion board, or reflecting on their strengths on a particular assignment with a peer in a breakout room.	Ignore or avoid the students or the issues they're facing or assume they aren't up to a task.
Be mindful of ensuring equity in terms of acknowledging and providing positive feedback to all students.	Continually affirm certain/the same students or compare achievements between students.
Remember that students transitioning from the classroom to VLE, or back to in-person instruction, may experience different levels of success or perceived competence depending on the environment.	Base feedback upon historical achievements, expectations, or successes; the uniqueness of this transition between learning environments may have unexpected impacts on many students.

WHEN TO ACT:

- If the student continues to exhibit a significant shift in behavior occurring over several weeks, or the frequency or severity increases, seek extra support from administration or school mental health professionals.
- If the student displays similar patterns of behavior with other subject teachers.
- If you have concerns about the student engaging in self-harming behaviors.

REFER STUDENTS TO FURTHER HELP IF NEEDED.

- Review your school policy for seeking student supports.
- Contact your school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other personnel.

LINKS TO RESOURCES:

- APA Topics ([apa.org/topics](https://www.apa.org/topics))
- Using Praise to Enhance Student Resilience and Learning Outcomes ([apa.org/education/k12/using-praise](https://www.apa.org/education/k12/using-praise))

- Maximizing children’s resilience (apa.org/monitor/2017/09/cover-resilience)
- Building Self-Esteem (psychcentral.com/lib/building-self-esteem)
- Being Me: A Kid’s Guide to Boosting Confidence and Self-Esteem (apa.org/pubs/magination/441B057)
- I Want Your Moo: A Story for Children About Self-Esteem, Second Edition (apa.org/pubs/magination/441B036)
- Helping Children Look Up When They Feel Down (maginationpressfamily.org/stress-anxiety-in-kids/helping-children-look-feel)
- Institute of Education Sciences Research-Based Strategies for Effective Remote Learning (bit.ly/34kJyIp)

Related mental health primers:

Stress, Sadness, Bullying

LOCAL RESOURCES:
