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Teaching Children To Be "I Can" Kids – May 2010

By Ilze van der Merwe

A teacher recently asked me the following question: "There is a little boy in my class this year who avoids tasks/challenges at all costs, many times without even trying. His favourite phrase is 'I can't' even although I've told him he can and tried to help him along. When I've managed to persuade him to try things, he gives up soon at the first sign of difficulty or if he gets even a little bit frustrated. What must I do to get him to participate?"

My answer to her: The issue here seems to be his lack of self confidence and believe in himself, therefore he uses avoidance by just stating "I can't".

He possibly uses this approach very successfully at home as well and then somebody jumps in and rescues him. Start by focusing on what he can do, even if it is very insignificant, e.g. building an easy puzzle.

Make him aware that you can see it is easy for him to build the puzzle. Help him by building his self confidence with easy and simple tasks that he can master. Remind him that it was easy for him to have built the puzzle and you know it will be easy for him to cut out the picture (or the task at hand), because he is a genius. You saw that he was a genius with the puzzle building. Kids love being told that they are a genius, even though they do not really understand what it means. They understand it means they are clever and smart.

Also ask his parents to assist him at home to build his self confidence by not doing everything for him, but to allow him to do that which is age appropriate and developmentally easy for him to do, e.g. pick up toys, putting his clothes in the laundry basket and feeding himself. Guide his parents to then give him feedback by saying to him; "See how easy that was for you. You can be so proud of yourself".

Notice; I am saying **you** can be proud of yourself and not **we** are proud of you. This encourages internal motivation for the child. Help the child to recognize your belief in him to enable him to tap into his own ability and his self belief. Teach him the affirmation "I unhook the † from can't" and let him sing it in a song to himself often to remind him of his ability.

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