

The Need to Feel Capable

Hearing our kids say, "I *can't* do it!" can be so painful. We tend to swoop in and fix the problem as quickly as we can. Sometimes we want to prevent that painful phrase so much that we do not even let them try the difficult thing in front of them, we just take care of it for them. Learning which situations benefit from this type of help, versus which ones might benefit from being left to your child to solve, can be really one of the ways to teach your child to fulfil the need to feel capable. Everyone has four types of needs: the need to be heard and understood for who you are, the need to feel significant and unique, the need to feel belonging, and the need to feel capable. These needs do not just apply to our children, they apply to everyone. Sometimes we, the parent, can hinder the fulfillment of the need to feel capable by stepping in too frequently and doing too many things for our child.

The need to feel capable supports the belief system that "I am competent." The belief that "I can handle things." The data shows a staggering number of anxieties in our children, at truly epidemic proportions. Today's children do not feel like they can handle things; they aren't feeling competent. There are many explanations for this, but for the purpose of this blog I'm going to focus on one of the reasons: our parenting style.

I once had a parent in one of my classes who spoke about the fights that she would have with her five-year-old daughter every night at bath time. As we all know, fighting with our children is exhausting. I want us to remember here, misbehavior is a form of communication, especially for our children. So rather than focus on the tip of the iceberg that was visible, I tried to dig a little deeper, to find the underlying cause for the misbehavior. I asked this parent to tell me more about her daughter, and in her description was the phrase, "she is very independent". I told her to stop right there. What we know about independent children is that they often just want to do things for themselves. I asked this parent if she could possibly let her daughter run her own bath. She looked at me like I was crazy and expressed her concern that it felt risky. I agreed that there was a risk but encouraged her *to take the time* to teach her to handle the risks. She could do that by teaching her which was the hot water, and which was cold, the signs that the water might be too hot, like if there was visible steam and to test the water with her hand quickly. Ultimately, I suggested that she take steps to teach her daughter about the risks, and then to let her try. When this parent returned to class the next week, she said that they did not have a single fight about bath time, and she was amazed at how well this solution worked. Teaching her daughter to handle the risk made

her feel capable. In this example her misbehavior was communicating that she wasn't feeling competent. I encourage all parents to ask themselves when their children misbehave, "Is there a chance that my child is not feeling capable, are they feeling incompetent right now?" And if the answer is yes, try to see this as an opportunity to *convey the message* that we believe in them, and that they can do it (even though it might take some time). It is so rewarding to hear your child say "Wow! I did it!" after conquering something difficult. That is how we all feel when we realize we can do a difficult thing. It doesn't work every time, but giving your child this narrative, like a mantra, is something that they will remember for the rest of their life if you repeat it over and over. By giving them opportunities to try hard things you'll begin to hear the mantra of "I did it."

The research shows that the outside world is not nearly as dangerous as what can happen to your child within your home. Yet, the fears of the outside world can keep parents from allowing their children to experience challenges that teach them how capable they truly are. As our children get older, the risks get bigger, and therefore more frightening. An example of this is from when we first moved to Connecticut. My son, Travis, had a friend who lived about half a mile away on a narrow, curvy street, with no sidewalks. We moved from Miami where there were sidewalks everywhere. I took this opportunity to teach all three of my children (Travis was nine, and my twin girls were seven) how to walk safely on the roads. The first time that my son walked by himself to his friend's house the mom called me and said, in these exact words, "I can't believe you let your son walk here!" I asked, "What's wrong with that?" She let me know that *nobody* in Redding lets their children walk on the streets, and although it shocked me, I am a firm believer in the concept of trying to teach my children to handle risks, not just avoid the risks.

Micromanaging our child's experience is an easy and common trap we fall into. We control their experiences by intervening with their grades, a teacher they don't like, a classmate they are struggling with... We will pick out their clothes, make sure they remember their jacket, all despite the fact that the consequences are minor and survivable. We unintentionally send the message that they are not capable, that they *can't* do it. We do this for many reasons. Sometimes because it's more convenient for us, sometimes as a way to protect them, or sometimes as a well-meaning kindness to them. We try to create a smooth path for them in an attempt to give them a perfect life. Children show up to college incapable of handling the stresses of dealing with the bumps in the road. Bumps are new to them. Schools are shocked by their inability to handle things on their own. This problem comes from parents' good intentions that did not accurately prepare them for the world. The unintended consequence of these good intentions is that we take away our child's

ability to gain confidence and competence. We rob them of the rich experience of learning that they can, in fact, do things for themselves.

I encourage parents to ask the question: am I getting in the way of my child feeling competent? If the answer is yes, which I am going to assume it is, then let's begin where your child is and where you are. This is living a life of exposure for both you and your child. Do things now that will build the sense of accomplishment and mastery.