



## Making Summer Matter

A unique approach to confidence building that will last all year round

By Rachel Rosenholtz, LCSW

A small dark haired girl named Talia was going into first grade. She was an extremely athletic child. Hula hooping was a major activity in her day camp and Talia was eager to try. After trying at it hard a few times, she quickly became frustrated with what she perceived as her poor performance. Her reaction to her “failure” was to give up entirely. She threw down the hula hoop and emphatically stated - “I’ll never be able to do this! I’m the worst hula hooper ever!” Her mother knew she was athletic and had strong core muscles and that with enough practice her daughter would surely succeed. Talia’s mother gently encouraged her daughter and was able to convince her to practice every day. Naturally, Talia improved and so did her confidence. By the end of the summer Talia had become the best Hula Hooper in her camp and even received an award for “Best at Hula Hooping”!

### The strength of summer

What seemed like just a short time ago the final day of school had concluded and kids were free for the summer. There was a collective sigh of relief perhaps loudest heard from students who struggled academically or socially. For them, it had been ten long months of studying, stressing out over school work and parents pulling their teeth to get them to do homework. Or constantly trying to fit in, feeling lonely and left out, and possibly even being bullied.

The summer months brought reprieve for both students and parents. Now school is almost back - but there is still time left.

Utilizing the remaining time left during summer to prepare for the coming school year can make a crucial difference for the next year’s academic and social success of your child.

For many students, learning and social difficulties come from an emotional place. If the child has no serious learning disabilities and overall is a capable student, then it is usually his perception of his abilities that determines performance as opposed to his actual inherent ability. He will struggle and perform below his capabilities simply because he does not have the confidence in himself. His belief that he cannot perform will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The same is true regarding social difficulties. Aside from children who are emotionally delayed, most often, insecurities are what get in the way of social success.

Insecurity creates anxiety which stifles the ability to hope and dream and blackens attitudes. This leads to many academic and social problems. The summer is a great time to address these emotional struggles. Without the pressure to perform in a school environment it is much easier to foster a healthy sense of ability and self-confidence in your child.

People with poor self-esteem tend to define themselves by what they are convinced they are bad at. Such a person will tend to only focus on personal failures. In school one failure can unfortunately make a big difference (for example, a failing test score) so it becomes hard not to focus on what are really just a few failures overshadowing everything else. A person with a healthy self-esteem won't let her flaws define who she is. She accepts the fact that no one is perfect at everything and instead focuses on areas she excels in. This type of mindset virtually knocks anxiety out of the equation because she is not inhibited by her fears of failing and she is free to take risks and do her very best

## **The key to confidence**

The key is helping your child restructure way she views himself. Try to create a shift in your child's focus from the things he can't do to the things he can. Especially if it is something he really can do but just doesn't believe it.

The first step is, as a parent, to know what your child is inherently good at. A kid can have natural talents or strengths but may not be utilizing or even be aware of them. Camp is wonderful place to help a child gain confidence and realize her strengths. There are abundant opportunities to succeed with the wide ranging camp activities from swimming to singing. There are also no negative "grade" or "mark" distractions.

It won't be enough to simply point out to your child what he is good at. He has to witness success firsthand to truly gain confidence in his abilities. He has to be able to take risks and experience success for himself.

The ability to take risks is crucial. Taking risks means the child is willing to attempt something new that he or she may or may not succeed in. The possibility of failure is very difficult for someone with self-esteem problems to cope with. Unfortunately, by avoiding new things, such a person will also lose out on the chance to succeed and the accompanying great feeling of accomplishment which helps foster self-confidence.

As a parent, you must encourage your child to take risks in activities that you are fairly certain she will succeed in (even if the child himself does not believe he will). This requires having a good sense of your child's natural talents and strengths. With so many diverse activities in camp you should be able to find something that you can be sure your child will succeed with. Even though camp is almost over, try to identify something that your child really succeeded at during camp. By focusing on her ability to be successful you will instantly increase her sense of confidence and create the energy for her to take on new risks, driving the cycle of risk, success, confidence.

You are your child's primary source of support. The fact is that children are highly influenced by how they believe their parents perceive them. Giving superficial complements such as you're a great kid or you're so good at (insert activity here) may not be enough to convince your child and sway his perception. Give specific, detailed compliments. Irrefutable compliments are best. Little by little his view of himself will change into a more positive oriented one. This will give him the confidence to try more things and take greater risks.

The same technique can be utilized to promote confidence in social situations. Kids who struggle socially in school tend to have more success in camp because of all the structured activities that force kids to play together. Help your child focus on these successes and see that she can actually make friends and be social. During the summer, families tend to do more activities together as well. During family activities, focus on your kids and say things like "I love spending time with you" or "I had such a great time doing that activity with you." The more they see you genuinely interested in spending time with them the more they will believe that they are fun to be around.

## **Back to school**

Entering into the new school year with a stronger and healthier sense of self, your child will be able to face his academic and social struggles with confidence. Continue the positive encouragement and support you were giving during the summer. This is crucial for maintaining the self confidence that was built up. Even if your child encounters "failures" he can always be reminded of his successes.

Talia was struggling with reading in the following school year and was ready to give up. Instead of telling Talia that of course she will be able to read, (a comment that Talia could debate) her mother would point to the certificate and reminded her of her hula hooping experience. She encouraged Talia to keep practicing, just like she did with hula hooping.

While reading did not come easily to Talia, the view she developed of herself was that with continued practice she could succeed. She learned to believe in herself and not to be frightened off by challenging situations. She now defines herself by what she is good at - not by what she struggles with.

The summer is quickly slipping by. Take advantage of this time. Parents are their child's greatest support system. Parents who are attuned to their child's strengths can encourage safe risks and cheer him on as he comes to realize and utilize his true potential.

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