Confidence Building/Self-Esteem/ and Negative Self-Talk

1. Validate the feeling, don't argue the label

Why it works (research-backed): Emotion coaching (Gottman-style) is linked to better emotional regulation and self-esteem. When parents immediately say, *"No you're not!"* kids often feel misunderstood and double down.

When he/she says: *"I'm stupid."*
You says:

- "Oof. That sounds like a really heavy thought."
- "Something must feel hard right now."
- "Tell me what made your brain say that."

Then gently reframe:

- "You're not stupid. You're frustrated."
- "Your brain is having a mean thought because this feels tricky."

At-home practice

"Name the inner critic" game:
Give the negative voice a silly name (ex: "Captain Mean Brain").
When he/she says, "I'm stupid," you say:

- "Uh oh, Captain Mean Brain is talking again."
  This helps kids separate their identity from the thought.

2. Praise effort + strategy, not traits

Why it works: Growth mindset research (Carol Dweck) shows kids build resilience when they learn ability grows with practice. Praising intelligence ("you're so smart") can actually make kids more afraid to fail.

Swap this

❌ "You're so smart!"
✅ "You worked hard and didn't quit."
✅ "That strategy you used really helped."
✅ "You improved because you practiced."

What to say in the moment

When he/she melts down:

- "This is a 'learning moment,' not a 'smart moment.'"

- “Your job isn’t to get it perfect. Your job is to keep trying.”
- “Let’s figure out what part is hard.”

At-home exercise

“Glow + Grow” at dinner (this is very similar to peaks and valleys which are recaps of the best and worst parts of the day, but these are more specific to they and his own behaviors/thoughts)

- Glow: something you did well today
- Grow: something you’re still working on
  Parents model it too, which normalizes mistakes.

3. Teach they to talk to themselves like a coach

Why it works: Self-compassion research (Kristin Neff) and CBT work show kinder self-talk improves persistence, emotion regulation, and confidence.

Parent language

- “If your best friend said, ‘I’m stupid,’ what would you say to them?”
- “Let’s talk to yourself like a coach, not a bully.”
- “Try again with a helpful sentence.”

Replacement phrases kids can memorize

Give them 3-5 “power phrases”:

- “This is hard, but I can try.”
- “I’m still learning.”
- “Mistakes help my brain grow.”
- “I can ask for help.”

At-home exercise

Make a “Coach Card”
Write the phrases on an index card, decorate it, and keep it where homework happens.
Parents can prompt:

- “Grab your coach card.”

4. Give them mastery experiences on purpose (confidence is built, not talked into)

Why it works: Bandura’s self-efficacy theory shows confidence grows most from *successfully doing hard things* — not reassurance.

So yes, you're right: games, hobbies, and interests are HUGE if they provide achievable challenge.

Instead of trying to convince them:

- "You ARE smart."
  you aim for:
- "Let's help you prove to yourself you can do hard things."

At-home confidence builder

The "80% challenge rule"
Pick activities where he/she succeeds about 70–80% of the time (not too easy, not too hard).
Examples:

- Lego sets slightly above his level
- beginner martial arts drills
- video games with manageable difficulty
- cooking tasks (measuring, mixing, cracking eggs)
- sports skills with a clear goal (X amounts of dribbles in a row)

What parents can say

- "I'm watching you practice, not perform."
- "That looked hard, and you stayed with it."
- "That's how confidence is made."

5. Respond to "I'm stupid" with curiosity + problem-solving, not rescue

Why it works: Kids build confidence when adults help them *tolerate frustration* instead of stepping in too quickly. Over-rescuing accidentally teaches: *"I can't handle this."*

When they say: *"I'm stupid!"*
You say calmly:

Step 1: Reflect

- "That sounds like frustration talking."

Step 2: Normalize

- "A lot of kids feel that way when something is hard."

Step 3: Get specific

- "Which part feels hardest: starting, remembering, or fixing mistakes?"

Step 4: Offer 2 choices

- “Do you want a hint, or do you want to try one more time first?”
- “Do you want a break, or should we do it together for two minutes?”

This gives control (which reduces shame) while still holding the expectation of trying.

At-home exercise

Frustration Scale
Teach them to rate feelings from 1–5.
Then build a plan:

- 1–2: keep going
- 3: ask for a hint
- 4: take a 3-minute break
- 5: stop and reset body (water, breathing, movement)

This turns “I’m stupid” into “I’m at a 4 right now.”

Bonus: What NOT to say (even though it’s tempting)

These usually backfire:

- ❌ “Stop saying that.”
- ❌ “You’re not stupid, you’re smart!” (arguing doesn’t teach coping)
- ❌ “If you think you’re stupid you won’t get anywhere.”
- ❌ “Other kids can do this.” (comparison = shame fuel)

Quick parent one-liner example

“That’s a frustrated thought. Let’s figure out what’s hard and try a new strategy.”