

Understanding Your Child's Negative Self-Talk

How to Help...

When Your Child Says "I'm Stupid"

A quick guide for responding in the moment

Your child just said something painful about themselves.

You want to help, but you're not sure what to say.

Here's a pattern you can follow.

Not every step is needed every time — trust what feels right in the moment.

Witness

Don't rush to fix or correct. Just acknowledge what you heard.

Say:

"That's a painful thing to say about yourself. I don't agree with it, but I can hear that you feel that way right now. What happened?"

You're:

Creating space for them to be heard, not dismissing their feeling or agreeing with their verdict.

Translate

Once they tell you what happened, name the feeling underneath the words.

Say:

"So [repeat what they told you]. You're feeling frustrated. That makes sense. That would feel intense for anyone."

You're:

Showing them the feeling is real, but the verdict isn't.

Right-size

Help them see that a moment isn't an identity.

Say:

"This one thing being confusing doesn't say anything about who you are. It says this particular thing is still being learned."

You're:

Matching the feeling to the actual size of what happened, not minimizing.

Show what's true

Offer concrete, specific evidence — not generic praise, just facts.

Say:

"Let me remind you what your brain can do: yesterday you figured out that puzzle. Last week you helped your sister. You taught yourself how to tie your shoes."

You're:

Providing real proof. Not "You're so smart" — just: you learn, you figure things out.

Ground in safety

Bring them back to what's actually happening right now.

Say:

"Right now this feels overwhelming. But look — you're not hurt. You're not in danger. You're safe. I'm here."

You're:

Letting their nervous system know that nothing dangerous is happening.

Offer bridge language

Give them words that hold both truths: the struggle is real, and they're safe.

Say:

"Can you try saying this with me?"

'I didn't get it yet — and I am still okay.'

'I don't understand this right now — and nothing bad is happening.'"

You're:

Teaching them language they can eventually use on their own.

Land in safety

Give them a place to rest after the intensity.

Say:

"This moment will pass. You are still you. You can rest now."

What doesn't help:

"No, you're not!" — argues with their experience

"You're so smart!" — generic reassurance they don't believe

"Don't say that!" — shuts down communication

"You're being dramatic" — minimizes their feeling

Remember:

This is a pattern, not a script.

Some moments need all the steps. Some need just one or two.

You're not trying to make the feeling disappear — you're helping your child stay with themselves instead of turning against themselves.

That's the work. And it matters.

Want to understand more deeply why this works?

Download the complete guide: *Understanding Your Child's Negative Self-Talk*

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