

## If You Want A Confident Girl, You Need To Know It's Not About Success.

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April 17, 2018

It's always a tough sell to convince a teen or tween girl to try something that she thinks she's not good at, that might require struggle, that might result in some failure. Utter humiliation alert! her brain screams. I'll just stay in my comfort zone — it's cosy here. But girls desperately need more risk in their diets, and a bit of failure, too. Why? Because it's risk — not perfection, not success, not racking up achievements — that actually helps to [build confidence in girls](#). And it's confidence — not an ideal resume or killer test scores or glowing recommendations — that leads to success later in life.



But tween and teen girls are experiencing a severe confidence shortage. Working with Ypulse, a polling firm that focuses on tweens and teens, we surveyed over 1,300 girls between the ages of 8 to 18, and their parents. What we found confirms what girls are telling us: confidence levels are evenly matched for boys and girls until the age of 12. But between the ages of 8 and 14, girls' confidence levels nose-dive by 30 percent.

Confidence hinges on action. It's the quality that literally turns our thoughts into action, taking them from random mental impulses to actual deeds. And that process, which usually involves some struggle and failure as well, is what creates more confidence. For some girls, it's trying out for a team or to perform in a talent show. Or it could mean stepping away from the smartphone without stressing about what their friends and frenemies are saying, or posting, or "liking." Or it could be as simple as putting a hand up in a social studies class without knowing the exactly right answer ahead of time. **Confidence means having a thought, and then doing something about it, instead of hesitating, analyzing, or ruminating. When girls do, their confidence grows.**

As girls approach adolescence, that openness to risk and failure becomes buried under an avalanche of biological and cultural signals telling them to be careful, value perfection, and avoid risk at all possible costs. But inherent in doing is risking — and that's the kicker. Trying things, especially new things, can beat a straight path to failing, a risk both uncomfortable and essential to building confidence. In the world of childhood, everything from learning to walk to balancing on a bike to playing tag is a beautiful dance of trying, risking, falling, failing, getting up, and trying again. If babies were risk-averse, then every time one toppled over as she tried to master those complicated motor skills, she'd stay plopped on the floor for the rest of her life. None of us would ever get beyond crawling. Kids take risks all the time, and that's how they learn and thrive. **But as girls approach adolescence, that openness to risk and failure becomes buried under an avalanche of biological and cultural signals telling them to be careful, value perfection, and avoid risk at all possible costs.**

For the more cautious girls, another key to the risk-taking that leads to confidence is stepping out of their sanctuaries, those comfort zones. They must get comfortable being uncomfortable. If girls only allow themselves to do what they're good at doing, then there are no risks of failure, no need to confront something difficult or hard and then bounce back. If a girl is a lightning-fast runner, then trying out for track (which is a definite action) is not risk or a leap of faith, and therefore not a confidence builder. If a girl is an academic star, then that achievement is not pushing her to grow her confidence. Risking and failing, that's where the confidence muscle is made. This is a hauntingly familiar pattern for girls: they usually do really well, and then tend to stick with what they know

Our polling data shows that the percentage of girls who say they are not allowed to fail rises 150 percent between the ages of 12 and 13, with 45 percent of 13-year-olds saying they don't feel able to fail. This is alarming evidence that staying safe, resisting risk, and shying away from actions that might lead to failure is not working for our girls.

So how to best get girls to test the waters of risk-taking?

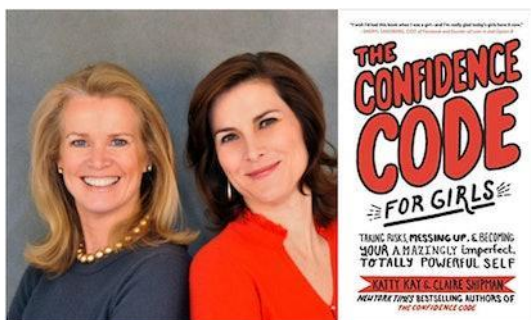
## Risk List

- Encourage her to take small steps. Help her break down a big challenge, which can seem overwhelming.
- Help her visualize her dream outcome. Let her know that athletes and performers do that all the time and it helps them to do amazing things.
- Still scared? Let her know it's OK to be afraid. She doesn't have to wait for her fear to vanish to act.

And how about some pick-up-the-pieces strategies for failure?

## Failure Fixes

- Help her change the channel for an hour or two. Read a book or walk the dogs or watch TV. It gives the fear centre of her brain a break.
- Take her on a mental hot air balloon ride to put things in perspective. Encourage her to picture herself floating high above the situation — and let her see that it's just a tiny part of a big wonderful life.
- Have a laugh together as you create an "It Could Be Much Worse So Much Worse" list. Imagine the silliest things possible to defuse her anxiety.
- Strategise about diving back in — if not immediately, at some point. It will help her see that she's learned from whatever happened.



Claire Shipman and Katty Kay are the authors of *The Confidence Code*, and [The Confidence Code For Girls](#), out now from HarperCollin