

# PORTLAND

*lifestyle & family*

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## Ask Ariel: Stopping the Negative Self-Talk



Dear Ariel,

My child always tries to keep up with his older brother and cousins. He plays with them, acts like them and seems to think he is older than he is. The problem is that when he is unable to do something that the bigger kids can, like read a book on his own, he gets very upset. When he is upset he calls himself horrible names and berates himself. I don't know how to get him to stop calling himself a stupid idiot.

Stuck Mom

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Dear SM,

Witnessing your child engage in the spiral of negative self-talk can cause any parent to feel like a failure. The habit is a very damaging thought cycle associated with low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders and poor academic performance. You are right to be concerned.

Some kids who develop negative self-talk are managing anxiety and fears that lead them to think disastrous thoughts. Some kids are perfectionists and the negativity helps balance out the desire to be perfect. In this case, it seems like your little boy believes he should have skills that are beyond his capacity at the moment. The first thing is to help him understand how thoughts affect how we feel. Explain to him, "Thoughts are words we say to ourselves. When we think badly about ourselves, then we feel badly." You can further explain that it is unfair to compare himself to his older brother and that when we have unrealistic expectations for ourselves, it can lead to disappointment. That feeling is normal. What isn't healthy is to hurt yourself with your thoughts.

One important way to help shift this negative thought pattern is to teach that we should not say things to ourselves or about ourselves that we wouldn't say to someone else. We would never call a friend or a family member "a stupid idiot," so we must teach our kids to not turn that anger inward. Having a family discussion and family agreements about being kind to ourselves as well as others might be worthwhile. As always, modeling positive self-talk for your son and giving specific praise for age-appropriate skills will also be helpful.

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SHARES

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families. She lives in Portland with her husband, son, dog and kitty cat.

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