

# Building Confidence in Children with Atopic Dermatitis



# Children with Eczema and Reduced Self-Esteem

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Self-esteem is the evaluation of our worth and values, which we typically assess from our abilities and limitations. Individuals with higher self-esteem tend to achieve higher academic or career performances, satisfaction with their life, and healthier relationships.

As eczema can be obvious to the human eye and is mostly inherent, children with eczema may feel that they are different and often identified to have lowered self-esteem. Moreover, results from a National Eczema Association survey showed that one in five children with eczema gets bullied in school because of their condition. These children, if left unnoticed, may develop mental health issues such as anxiety or depression.

That said, if parents are able to build a secure foundation for their children from a young age, external challenges (e.g. bullying) would have a lower impact on children's self-esteem.



# Words matter

Children learn about their world through their caregivers' words, tones, beliefs, emotions, and values. This means their eczema narrative can be shaped even before they start to speak.

Take a moment to reflect on how you describe or approach your child's eczema.

Do you unknowingly say or do the following?

- Saying something like "I know it is **troublesome** to do the body wraps or apply creams"
- Calling it a "**terrible** rash"
- Frowning your eyebrows, wrinkling your nose, and raising up your upper lip to inverted "U" in **disgust** when looking at or treating your child's eczema

Language and facial expressions are extremely important in conveying a message. Reframing thoughts or language helps us cope more effectively and provides our children a more neutral narrative of their eczema.

Examples of reframing language & managing expressions:

REFRAIN FROM 	USE THIS INSTEAD 
I know it is <b>troublesome</b> to do the body wraps or apply creams <b>but</b> it is good for you	I know <b><u>you do not like</u></b> the body wraps, but it is <b><u>important</u></b> we do this because it is <b><u>helpful</u></b> for your skin
<b>Terrible/ horrible</b> rash	Eczema
Expressions of <b>disgust</b> or <b>shock</b>	Maintain a <b><u>neutral expression</u></b> , <b><u>gentle tone</u></b> , and <b><u>calm voice</u></b>

# Building developmentally appropriate independence

Experiencing eczema comes with a lot of “have to” :

- Have to do wet wraps
- Have to take zinc baths
- Have to put on moisturisers/steroids
- Have to see doctor

Being constantly instructed on what needs to be done can decrease children’s confidence and decision making ability. It may also increase opposition.

Providing children with choices empowers them to evaluate their needs, which encourages independency as they grow older and build their self-esteem. Additionally, it is important to provide them with choices related to their skin care treatment.

## Examples:

<b>2-4 years old</b>	“Which pyjamas do you want to wear?” “Which toy do you want to take a bath with today?”
<b>5-7 years old</b>	“Do you want to apply your moisturiser yourself or do you want mummy/daddy to do it?”
<b>7-12 years old</b>	Engage in collaborative problem-solving; it can be helpful to discuss their thought and choices. “If you skip your bath tonight, what do you think will happen?” “How do you think your body will feel if you decide to not apply the cream?” “Will it be more helpful to go to your friend’s house later and do some skin care now or to be on time and not be able to focus on playing because your skin feels itchy?”

## Set small goals and steps

Setting small goals and steps can be helpful in increasing their sense of achievement. Adopting a reward system can also be useful in motivating children to engage in making choices.

- Discuss a reward that entices your child. It could be time spent with parents after engaging in treatment, 1:1 dates, or small rewards.
- Set out the number of times that your child demonstrates desired behaviour—start with a lower number and gradually increase it.
- Provide a star or stamp with each attempt. Rewarding their attempts focuses on the process to build their confidence as opposed to the results.
- Do not take away the stamps/stars that are already on their reward chart. Punishing them by removing their past successes may reduce their motivation.

# Focus on strengths and interests

For some children, majority of their attention and priority goes to eczema care. This may cause them to experience some restrictions and be told the following:

You can't do this activity because your eczema will flare. ❌

No, you can't wear this because it irritates your skin. ❌

Don't eat that, your skin will itch. ❌

Over time, eczema may begin to define them.

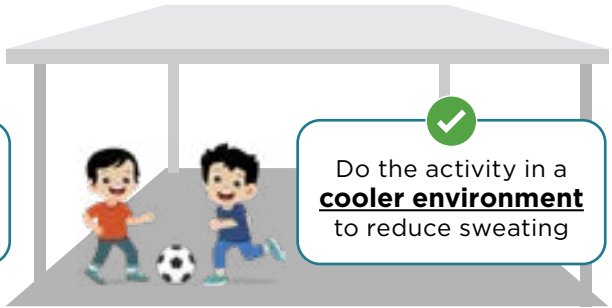
While it is important to be mindful of eczema care, remember to also focus on your child's strength and interests. Encouraging your child to engage in activities that he/she is interested in can help your child develop their passion and their identity.

Avoid restricting your child's activity entirely but find activities that he/she can do without aggravating their eczema, or take extra steps to keep their condition controlled while still continuing with their interests.

For example, if your child likes to exercise but sweating is known to trigger flare ups, you may consider the following for your child:



✔  
Wear **cotton or bamboo** fabric clothes



✔  
Do the activity in a **cooler environment** to reduce sweating

Focusing on your child's strengths and interests can also help develop your child's view of themselves.

I'm Anna and I have eczema ❌

I'm Anna. I like baking, play volleyball, have a pet cat, and oh yes, I have eczema ✔

## Be mindful and validate your child's emotions

Flare-ups can be uncomfortable and frustrating for children. It gets worse, when children think their situation is not going to improve due to reoccurrence of flare-ups. This can result in them experiencing shifts in mood and need to be comforted by their parents.

Learn how to be mindful, help your child manage their emotions, and set boundaries for appropriate behaviours. Here are some tips:



### Help your child express their emotions

Reflect together with your child on how they are feeling when you notice a certain expression or behaviour. For example, you can ask "I can see that you are raising your voice and frowning as you are scratching, what are you feeling?".



### Validate their emotions and set boundaries

- a. Thank you for telling me how you feel (*use of behaviour specific praise*).
- b. I hear that you are feeling angry and frustrated with the flare-ups (*reiterating their emotions*) and it makes you want to throw or kick things (*validation of why they behave a certain way NOT acceptance of behaviour*).
- c. When you do that, it destroys your toys, which makes you feel even more upset (*consequence of behaviour*).
- d. What do you think we can do right now to help you manage your anger? Shall we do our breathing or run our anger out? Do you want to play out how we can support you or paint it out? (*Increase healthier emotion coping strategies such as mindfulness, relaxation exercises, play therapy for younger children, and/or art therapy.*)



### Be mindful of your own emotions

Being the caregiver for a child with eczema can be overwhelming and it can often take a toll on you. It may cause you to direct the feelings of fatigue, frustration, sadness, and/or grief to your child. Identify and understand how you feel when your child's eczema flare-ups or when you end up "fighting" with your child when he/she refuses to cooperate with skin care treatments.

- a. Check in with your body sensations and thoughts (*e.g. what is your heart, chest, or stomach feeling? What are some thoughts running through your mind?*).

It is essential for you to practise self-care (e.g. taking some time in the day to do what you enjoy, making daily chores more enjoyable such as listening to music while cleaning the house).

Once you have recognised your own emotions, take a minute or two to engage in relaxation exercises.

Here is one you may try, click or scan the QR code to watch the video.



If your child is experiencing persistent difficulties with their self-esteem, mood, and/or displaying behaviours that are concerning, please consult your child's Paediatrician.

## Other Instructions



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The information provided in this publication is meant purely for educational purposes and may not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis or treatment. You should seek the advice of your doctor or a qualified healthcare provider before starting any treatment or if you have any questions related to your health, physical fitness or medical condition.

# About the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children’s Medical Institute (KTP-NUCMI)

The KTP-NUCMI is the paediatric arm of the National University Hospital and comprises the Departments of Paediatrics, Paediatric Surgery and Neonatology. We provide comprehensive and specialised medical and surgical services for newborns, children and adolescents. NUH is the only hospital in Singapore that offers paediatric kidney and liver transplant programmes. Through a generous gift from the Estate of Khoo Teck Puat, we have set up an integrated outpatient facility with medical, diagnostic and rehabilitation services.

For more information about us, visit [www.nuh.com.sg/ktp-nucmi](http://www.nuh.com.sg/ktp-nucmi).

## Contact Us

### **24-hour Children’s Emergency**

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### **KTP-NUCMI**

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### **NUH Child Development Unit @ Keat Hong**

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