

Building Student Motivation & Confidence



Purpose

Motivation and confidence grow when students feel safe, capable, and supported. As a tutor, your role is not to pressure students to perform, but to help them believe they can learn and improve.

This guide provides simple, tutor-friendly strategies you can use during lessons and student interactions to increase engagement, reduce frustration, and support positive learning outcomes.

How to Use This Guide

Use the steps below during lessons, small-group work, or moments of frustration to support student motivation and confidence with minimal preparation.

Step 1: Set the Tone in the First 60 Seconds

Use this step at the beginning of every session.

Goal: Make students feel safe to try.

✓ Do

- Greet the student by name.
- Set a clear, short goal for the session.
- Normalize effort and mistakes.

Tutor Could Say:

- “Today we’re going to work on one skill and build it step by step.”
- “It’s okay if this feels challenging. That means your brain is working.”

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



Step 2: Create a Quick Win Early

Goal: Help students feel capable right away.

✓ Do

- Start with an easier problem/question first.
- Provide one scaffold (sentence starter, hint, model) to guarantee momentum.
- Celebrate the effort and the strategy, not just the answer.

🗣️ Tutor Could Say:

- “Let’s start with one we can get quickly.”
- “That strategy helped you move forward.”

Examples of quick wins:

- reviewing a familiar concept
- completing the first step together
- answering a low-risk question

Step 3: Engage Students with Choices

Goal: Increase ownership and reduce resistance.

✓ Do

- Offer two acceptable options (both meet the lesson goal).
- Let students pick the order or format.

Note: All choices should support the same learning goal.

🗣️ Tutor Could Say:

- “Do you want to start with the first one together, or try it and I’ll support?”
- “Would you rather explain it out loud or show it on paper?”

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



Step 4: Ask Confidence-Building Questions

Goal: Help students notice progress and build belief in themselves.

✓ Do

- Ask questions that highlight growth and strategies.
- Keep prompts short and easy to answer.

💡 To highlight progress, the tutor could say:

- “What feels easier now?”

💡 To highlight strategy, the tutor could say:

- “What helped you get started?”

💡 To reinforce growth, the tutor could say:

- “What do you understand better than before?”

Step 5: Use Feedback That Builds Mindset

Goal: Replace “I’m not good at this” with “I can improve with support.”

✓ Use “Process Praise” (specific and true)

- “You did ___ by using ___.”

💡 Tutor Could Say:

- “You kept going even when it was tricky—that’s persistence.”
- “You checked your work and fixed it—that’s strong learning.”
- “You solved that problem by breaking it into steps.”

🧠 Avoid generic praise

- Instead of: “Good job!”
- Say: “Good job using the number line to check your answer.”

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



Step 6: When Students Get Stuck, Use the Reset Routine

Goal: Prevent shutdown and keep learning moving.

✓ The 3-Part Reset

1. Pause and validate:
 - “This is a tough one.”
2. Shrink the task:
 - “Let’s do just the first step together.”
3. Restart with support:
 - “Now you try the next step.”

Tutor Could Say:

- “You’re not behind—you’re learning. Let’s break it into smaller pieces.”

Step 7: Reframe Mistakes as Information

Goal: Keep mistakes from becoming shame.

✓ Do

- Treat incorrect answers as clues.
- Ask what the student was thinking.
- Model how to revise.

Tutor Could Say:

- “That answer helps us because now we know what to fix.”
- “Tell me what you were thinking so I can help you adjust.”
- “Let’s try a different strategy.”

Reminder: Never use mistakes as a measure of ability—use them as information.

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



Step 8: End with Reflection and a Clear Win

Goal: Make progress visible and send students out confident.

✓ Do

- Name one specific improvement.
- Preview what comes next.
- End with a short, achievable “next step.”

🗣️ Tutor Could Say:

- “Today you improved at ____ by using ____.”
- “Next time we’ll practice the same skill with one more challenge.”
- “Before we end, show me one example you feel confident about.”

Reminder: End every session with a clear win and next step.

Quick Reference: What to Say When...

🧠 When a **student says “I can’t”:**

Reframe: “You can’t yet. Let’s do the first step together.”

🧠 When a **student avoids trying:**

Reframe: “Pick one: Try it first, or watch me model one example.”

🧠 When a **student is frustrated:**

Reframe: “Let’s take a quick reset. We’ll shrink it and try again.”

🧠 When a **student succeeds:**

Highlight: “That worked because you _____. Keep using that strategy.”

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



For Younger Students (Elementary)

What Younger Students Need Most

- frequent reassurance
- clear structure and routines
- immediate feedback on effort

✓ Do

- Break tasks into very small steps.
- Celebrate effort often and out loud.
- Model thinking before asking students to try.

🗣️ Tutor Could Say:

- “Let’s try just the first part together.”
- “You didn’t give up—that’s how learning happens.”
- “I like how you tried a new strategy.”

⊘ Avoid

- giving long explanations
- waiting too long to step in
- expecting independence before modeling



Helpful Tip: Young students often show confidence through willingness to try, not accuracy. If a student is attempting the task—even imperfectly—confidence is building.

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



For Older Students (Middle and High School)

What Older Students Need Most

- respect for independence
- choice and ownership
- private, specific feedback



Do

- Offer choices whenever possible.
- Keep praise specific and focused on strategy.
- Normalize struggle without over-explaining.

Feedback Tip: When possible, give feedback quietly or one-on-one. Older students are more confident when corrections are not public.



Tutor Could Say:

- “Which approach do you want to try first?”
- “That strategy worked—keep using it.”
- “This is challenging, but you’re making progress.”



When an older student disengages or shuts down:

- Offer a choice instead of a correction.
- Ask a reflective question.
- Give space, then re-engage.



Tutor Could Say:

- “Do you want to try this now or come back to it after one example?”
- “What part feels unclear right now?”



Helpful Tip: Older students may hide confusion to protect their confidence. Quiet check-ins and reflective questions often work better than direct correction.

Building Student Motivation and Confidence



Confidence-Building Reminders for All Ages

- Confidence comes from success + support, not pressure.
- Small wins matter more than speed.
- Mistakes are information, not failure.
- Your calm tone and consistency build trust.

What This Looks Like in Practice

- smaller tasks before harder ones
- more modeling, less correcting
- naming effort before naming accuracy

Tutor Mindset Check

If a student seems unmotivated, ask yourself:

- Does the task feel manageable?
- Have I made progress visible?
- Have I acknowledged effort, not just results?

If the answer is “no” to any question above, adjust your support—not your expectations.

Adjust support before adjusting expectations.

Final Reminders

- Keep goals small and visible.
- Give students language to describe effort and strategies.
- Your calm tone and consistency build trust.

Students build confidence when adults believe in their ability to grow—even before they do.

