



background

Report # 125

Effort & Persistence

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Teaching children the value of trying *Studies suggest ways to promote effort and persistence*

Praising children for accomplishing something special seems, on its face, the right thing to do - and the more often the better. So it's not surprising that the idea of using praise more strategically may seem counterintuitive to many parents.

"I feel like I'm being asked to abandon praise," one parent said during a workshop in which the use of praise was among the topics. "I worry that it could negatively impact his self-esteem."

And yet, the measured use of praise is one of the ways researchers say parents can promote the development of effort and persistence in early childhood.

Studies suggest that to promote effort and persistence it is better to lead a child to explore the process of figuring out a math problem, for example, than it is to praise the child as "smart" for coming up with a correct answer.

Recent research has kindled a growing awareness of the importance of instilling in children a value of effort and persistence that will benefit them throughout their lives.

The effort and persistence seen in very young children are important traits for learning and development. A one-year-old, for example, learns to walk through a series of trips, tumbles and falls.

But for many children, the link between effort and ability tends to fade with age. A fifth grader struggling with math, for example, may give up trying, write-off math as something he or she will never grasp and abandon the notion that a little more effort may eventually lead to success.

The good news is that research is not only advancing the understanding of effort and persistence in children, but also showing how parents, teachers and other adults in children's lives can promote the idea that trying to get better at something is worth it.

In one of its current projects, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) Division of Applied Research and Evaluation is collaborating with The Fred Rogers Company to explore how parents and teachers can help young children embrace effort and persistence in school and in life. The project, Something Worth Trying, focuses on children from age 3 years to the third grade.

OCD Fellow Junlei Li became interested in effort and persistence when, as part of a research project, he taught middle school science to low-income minority children. It was clear to him that some of the children in the class had already developed a mindset

Children with a "fixed mindset" discount the value of effort in improving an ability. They may think, for instance, that just because they do poorly in math now, and no one in their family has done well in math, that they will never be good at it no matter how hard they try.

that they were incapable of learning certain subjects.

"You would see students who were struggling and no longer believed they would get any better," said Li, PhD, director of the Division of Applied Research and Evaluation. "They would start to act out in the classroom or would appear to be bored with the subject matter because they no longer believed they could do something to make a difference in their own accomplishment in these subject areas."

All About Mindset

Children and adults with a "growth mindset" tend to link effort and persistence with improvement in ability, studies suggest. On the other hand, children with a "fixed mindset" discount the value of effort in improving an ability they are struggling to develop.

"The fixed mindset is: I'm only as

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good as I am today. If I'm lousy at math, I'm never going to be good at math. It's not my thing. Art, maybe, is my thing. But my mom is not good at math. Nobody in my family is good at math. So, I'm not going to be good at it," Dr. Li said.

"There is a shift from early childhood through elementary school age in many children from embracing a growth mindset to a large proportion of children embracing the fixed mindset, whether they are gifted or not gifted. Our argument, based on the research, is that a lot of why they develop that kind of thinking comes from their environment. It comes from how schools or parents or teachers interact with children, particularly in how we emphasize intelligence, natural ability, performance and competition. We overlook the painstaking but ultimately rewarding process of making small, incremental progress each and every day."

Research offers a few promising examples of interventions to promote effort among children. One study, for example, focused on teaching minority, at-risk middle school students about how intelligence is a malleable trait and how effort begets ability. After two weekly sessions, their academic motivation improved, as did their year-end math grades.

The Downside of Praise

Praise, often used to encourage desirable behavior, can weaken a child's embrace of effort. Studies find that while praising a child for effort is fine, praising for his or her intelligence can lead to a counterproductive mindset.

When, for example, a child demonstrates he or she can add 2 and 2 and arrive at 4, a parent might respond by saying something like, "You're so smart." But researchers say that such

praise of intelligence over time can make a child anxious, afraid to make mistakes or take risks and leave them ill equipped to handle failure.

In the Pittsburgh-based project, Something Worth Trying, observations of workshops with parents of preschool and kindergarten children suggest such praise is common. "I've noticed that praise is ubiquitous, especially 'good job,'" said one parent. "My daughter is praised constantly by me, by people in stores, everywhere. She seems to get praised just for going with the flow, or not causing a disturbance." And another parent commented: "I noticed that when I'm busy or distracted, I fall back on 'good job' or 'that's nice.'"

Studies suggest that process-focused feedback is a more constructive approach than simply praising a child for an accomplishment. Engaging a child in the process can reinforce the value of effort and persistence and help a child understand that mistakes are part of learning.

In the case of a child adding 2 and 2 to get 4, a parent might have the child explain the way he or she figured out the answer, then ask whether the child is able to use the same method to add other numbers correctly.

Parents in the Something Worth Trying workshops seemed to understand that concept, said Alan Friedman, program manager with The Fred Rogers Company. "In talking to them, the challenge is how to practically integrate it into their day-to-day life.

We heard from some parents that they felt a little guilty about not showering their kids with praise for accomplishments. It took a little conscious consideration to think about ways of praising the process kids were going through versus just the outcome.

"It's tough. It isn't as if there are easily accessible lessons or strategies. That's the challenge we've taken on."

Interventions Explored

Work is underway to develop and adapt interventions that promote effort and persistence in the classroom and home as part of the project.

For example, researchers identified several messages that both underscore the importance of effort and resonate with parents. One is that effort is valuable for its own sake, regardless of its outcomes. Another is that interest and willingness to participate in activities and learning experiences will serve children well throughout life.

With such messages in mind, a prototype parent-child interaction vehicle was designed called "The Trying Box," a concept similar to scrapbooking that allows children and parents to collect mementos symbolizing things the child tries or puts effort into.

It's all part of an effort to instill in children a lasting understanding of the value of effort. "If you end up with a more effortful child who is persistent, even when the child isn't doing well in something, it will benefit the child in the long run," said Dr. Li.



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