

## Tips for Parents: The importance of effort

***Success depends on two related factors—attitude and effort. For good or for bad, children’s attitudes about their ability to succeed determine the kind of effort they put forth to accomplish a task. If children attribute poor performance to the wrong factors, they may be in for a lifelong struggle with failure.***

### **Children need to feel in control.**

Many children have a ready explanation every time they fail at a task or do poorly in school. What they say gives an important insight into how they think about success and failure.

**“It wasn’t me.”** Often, a child’s explanation indicates that he or she feels out of control. When children say a test was too hard, for example, that’s another way of saying they had less control over the result.

**When children feel out of control, they typically don’t try.** It isn’t that kids don’t want to take responsibility. Some children are convinced that people do well because of outside factors—for example, they’re lucky or they’re liked by the teacher. Unfortunately, when children believe that success or failure is not related to what *they* do, they see no reason to change their behavior, so their level of effort stays the same. And so does their pattern of failure.

**Feeling out of control can weaken self-esteem.** To have good self-esteem, a child needs to feel proud when he or she does well. But children can’t feel proud unless they take credit for succeeding. Unfortunately, when children believe success comes from outside factors, they probably won’t feel proud even when they do succeed. Instead, they’ll decide the task was easy, or they got lucky, or they had a good day. This can have a negative effect on self-esteem. It also won’t encourage the child to try harder in the future.

### **Children need to believe they can change.**

**“I just can’t do it.”** A lot of children think they just aren’t smart enough to do well in school. Although this is one way of taking responsibility for doing poorly, it won’t help your child do better in the future. Intelligence, or aptitude, is something that we don’t usually believe we can change. And children who believe they can’t change how smart they are also believe they can’t change how well they do in school.

**Being “smarter” isn’t the answer.** Parents can sometimes put too much emphasis on aptitude by praising their children’s natural gifts or excusing failures because of lack of talent. This is a natural tendency, but it can backfire. In fact, while aptitude certainly plays a part in how well children do in school, it is not the key. Gifted children who don’t try often don’t do well. Children of average ability who try very hard usually excel.

**Change the things that can be changed.** Maybe we don't get any smarter, but our level of effort is certainly something we can change. And everyone improves when they put forth more effort. The trick is to convince your children that change is possible. When they believe change is possible, they'll be motivated to try harder. When they try harder, they'll do better. When they do better, they'll build up their expectations for future success. And when a child expects to succeed, he or she is more likely to succeed.

### **You can help your child take control and make changes.**

We send subtle messages about success and failure every day. Be sure to send your child the right message. Here are some tips:

- **Praise effort rather than success.** This is the most important thing you can do. It focuses your child's attention on the right issues.
- **Praise improvement.** This emphasizes that things are changing and motivates your child to have higher expectations for the future.
- **Don't give too much praise.** Praise is important, but too much and children begin to doubt that they've really earned it. Remember, it's important for children to feel they've *earned* their success.
- **Too many rewards don't work.** This follows the same reasoning as too much praise. Your child needs to feel that a reward is deserved.
- **Don't help too much.** If you give your children too much help, they can't take credit for what goes right. In addition, they'll begin to think that you don't believe they can succeed on their own—and they'll begin to believe it, too.
- **Don't be too sympathetic when your child fails.** This is a tough one, but too much sympathy may send the message that you don't believe your child could have done any better.
- **Don't compare what other children do.** It's hard for a child to focus on effort when others keep emphasizing results. Focus on how hard your child tries. Your child will automatically take pride in the result.
- **Talk to the teacher.** If your child is having trouble with assignments, ask about them. Are they too hard? Too easy?

For more information:

“MY CHILD'S ACADEMIC SUCCESS: Motivation -- Helping Your Child through Early Adolescence” <http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/partx4.html>

Brophy, Jere. “Motivating Students to Learn.” Laurence Earlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004.

