

RAISING KIDS

# Kids Try Harder When They See You Make Mistakes, Research Finds

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I always dread when my children receive a new toy that requires some real high-level skills to put together. Removing the toy out of the package, let alone assembling it, causes the sweat to pour down my face. I feel so much pressure to be able to do everything right for my kids, even if I have no idea how to. It's not like I majored in toy removal and construction in college!

Why do we stress so much to be perfect in front of our kids? Well, fortunately you can scratch that concern off your list right now because a new study reveals that it is actually helpful for children's development if they see their parents make mistakes and struggle to reach their goals.

The new study from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was published in the September 21st edition of Science. The researchers set out to explore how young children learn to decide when to try hard and when it is not worth the time or effort to do so. The specific question they asked was "Does seeing an adult exert effort to succeed encourage infants to persist longer at their own challenging tasks?" This concept is so important to understand because a child's perseverance and value of hard work can help predict academic success in school and beyond, even more so than their IQ.

The experiment involved 15-month-old babies who participated in a series of tasks. First, they watched an adult perform two challenges: removing a toy frog from a container and removing a key chain from a carabiner, a metal loop with a spring-loaded gate. Half of the babies watched the adult quickly complete the task three times within 30 seconds. The other half saw the adult struggle for 30 seconds before accomplishing the task.

Next, the babies were shown a musical toy with a button that looked like it should turn the toy on but it actually did not work at all. There was also a hidden, yet functional, button on the bottom of the toy. When the baby was not watching, the adult turned the toy on to show that it played music. Then the demonstrator turned it off and gave it to the baby. Each baby was allotted two minutes to play with the toy. During this time, the researchers recorded how many times the baby tried to press the button that seemed like it should turn the toy on. They found that babies who watched the adult struggle with the toy before succeeding pressed the button nearly twice as many times as those who saw the adult easily succeed. They also pressed it twice as many times before asking for help or giving up and throwing the toy aside. Those infants were more willing to try hard and struggle to reach a goal because they saw their mentor work hard.

The researchers also found that direct interactions with the babies made a difference in how hard they worked. When the adult said the infants' names, made eye contact with them, and talked directly to them, the babies tried harder to accomplish the task than when the adult did not directly engage with them.

From these observations, the researchers concluded that babies who watched an adult struggle with the tasks ended up trying harder at their own difficult task, compared to babies who saw the adult complete the task easily right away. Therefore, the researchers suggest that it is beneficial for children to see their parents and other adults work hard to achieve their goals. Struggling – and even failing – in front of our children at times will help them learn the value of effort and improve their own work ethic as they go through life.

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