

Helping a Child Who Gives Up as Soon as Schoolwork Gets Hard

When a child quits as soon as schoolwork becomes difficult, the goal is not to demand more effort blindly. Help the child learn what to do when effort alone is not enough. APA guidance for families explains that children are more willing to attempt challenging tasks and persist when they believe abilities can improve through practice, effective strategies, and help from others.¹ The same guidance recommends focusing feedback on effort, strategy, persistence, and what can be learned from mistakes rather than describing a child as simply "smart" or "not good" at a subject.¹ Start by changing the meaning of difficulty. A hard problem is information: the current strategy has reached its limit and another step is needed. APA's teaching principles note that students who pursue mastery goals - improving skills and understanding - tend to persist more during challenging work because mistakes can be treated as information about what has not yet been learned.² Teach a short response to getting stuck: pause, identify the exact point of confusion, try one different strategy, then ask for a specific kind of help. Keep the next challenge close to the child's current skill level rather than so difficult that success feels unreachable. When the child persists, praise the process specifically: "You tried a second strategy," "You checked the example," or "You asked a clear question." APA guidance on praise recommends emphasizing effort and work strategies rather than intelligence, which can support persistence and resilience when students encounter setbacks.³ Over time, the target is not never feeling frustrated. It is learning that frustration can trigger a useful next step instead of immediate withdrawal.

Did You Know?

- ✓ APA guidance for families links growth-oriented beliefs with greater willingness to try challenging work and persist through difficulty.¹
- ✓ APA teaching principles describe mastery goals as focusing on improving competence, with mistakes treated as information about what still needs to be learned.²
- ✓ APA recommends process praise that identifies effort and effective strategies rather than praising intelligence alone.³

Research Sources

1. American Psychological Association. "Top 10 Principles from Psychology for Families to Help Children Learn and Succeed in School."
2. American Psychological Association. "Pre-K to 12 Teaching Principle: Motivation."
3. American Psychological Association. "Using Praise to Enhance Student Resilience and Learning Outcomes."

Getting Unstuck: A Five-Step Persistence Plan

Use this page to teach a repeatable response to difficult schoolwork so frustration leads to a next step instead of immediate quitting.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Subject/task: _____ Challenge level: _____

1. Name the Stuck Point - About 2 Minutes

Identify the exact direction, problem, word, or step that is causing difficulty.

I am stuck on: _____

2. Check What You Already Know - About 2 Minutes

Find one fact, example, direction, or earlier step that is clear.

What I know: _____

3. Try a Different Strategy - About 3 Minutes

Use an example, draw it, reread directions, work backward, or break the task into a smaller part.

Strategy I tried: _____

4. Ask for Specific Help - About 2 Minutes

If still stuck, ask a question that identifies exactly what help is needed.

My question: _____

5. Name the Persistence - About 1 Minute

Record the strategy or behavior that helped you stay with the task.

I kept going by: _____

What Parents Can Say: "Hard does not mean stop. Show me where you got stuck, then choose one strategy to try before we decide the next step."