

When Your Child Says, “I’m Just Bad at School”

When a child says, “I’m just bad at school,” treat the statement as a conclusion to examine, not a label to accept. The American Psychological Association explains that children are more willing to attempt challenging work and persist when they believe abilities can improve through practice, effective strategies, and help from others.¹ Start by narrowing the statement. Ask, “What happened today that made you feel that way?” A child who says “school” may actually mean fractions, reading aloud, remembering assignments, writing quickly, or one difficult test. Avoid answering with a vague “No, you’re not.” Instead, help the child connect outcomes to changeable factors: preparation, strategy, practice, asking for help, or the specific skill that still needs instruction. APA guidance on praise recommends emphasizing effort and effective work strategies rather than describing success or failure as evidence of fixed intelligence.² Then identify one small next action the child can control. That might be practicing five problems, reviewing one paragraph, asking the teacher one question, or using a checklist before turning in work. Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child notes that executive-function and self-regulation skills support planning, attention, and goal-directed behavior and develop through practice and supportive interactions.³ The goal is not to promise that every task will become easy. It is to replace a global identity statement with a more accurate message: “This part is hard right now, and there is a next step I can take.”

Did You Know?

- ✓ APA reports that children who believe abilities can grow are more willing to try challenging tasks and work toward mastery.¹
- ✓ APA recommends praise that identifies effort and effective strategies rather than labeling a child as simply “smart” or “not good” at a subject.²
- ✓ Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child describes executive-function and self-regulation skills as capacities that strengthen through practice and supportive interaction.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. “Using Praise to Enhance Student Resilience and Learning Outcomes.”
3. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. “Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills.”

Turn “I’m Bad at School” Into a Next-Step Plan

Use this page to replace a broad negative label with one specific problem, one useful strategy, and one manageable next step.

Child’s name: _____ Date: _____

School subject/task: _____ Recent challenge: _____

1. Capture the Exact Thought - About 2 Minutes

Write the statement your child is making without arguing with it first.

My thought: _____

2. Narrow the Problem - About 2 Minutes

Identify the exact class, skill, assignment, or moment behind the statement.

The hard part is: _____

3. Find One Changeable Factor - About 2 Minutes

Choose something the child can influence: practice, strategy, preparation, organization, or asking for help.

I can change: _____

4. Choose One Next Step - About 3 Minutes

Make the action small and specific enough to complete today or at the next school opportunity.

My next step: _____

5. Rewrite the Message - About 1 Minute

Replace the global label with a more accurate statement about the current challenge.

New message: _____

What Parents Can Say: “Let’s not turn one hard part into a label about who you are. Show me the exact problem, and we’ll choose one next step.”