

Helping a Child Who Says, “I’m Just Not Good at School”

When a child says, “I’m just not good at school,” the statement can quickly become more than frustration about one assignment. It can turn a temporary difficulty into a fixed conclusion about ability. Do not argue with the child or answer with vague reassurance such as “Of course you are smart.” Start by narrowing the statement. Ask, “What happened today that made you feel that way?” Separate the event from the identity: a low score, slow reading, forgotten homework, or a confusing lesson is a problem to understand, not proof that the child cannot learn. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises helping children accept mistakes and setbacks as normal parts of living and learning while giving constructive feedback and recognizing effort.¹ Confidence grows from experiences of mastery, not from praise alone. Help your child choose one reachable goal, identify the next skill to practice, and notice evidence of improvement. AAP guidance on positive experiences for school-age children notes that children build confidence when they complete projects, learn new skills, and reach goals they have helped set.² If the child repeatedly struggles in the same area, avoid treating the problem as a motivation defect. Academic difficulty can reflect learning, behavioral, emotional, or other factors, and persistent school struggles should be discussed with the teacher and pediatrician.³ At home, use language that leaves room for growth: “You cannot do this independently yet. Let’s figure out which part you understand and which part needs more teaching.” Praise specific actions—asking a question, correcting an error, trying a second strategy—rather than labels such as “smart.” The goal is accurate confidence: the child learns that difficulty is information, effort is purposeful, and getting appropriate help is part of becoming a capable learner.

Did You Know?

- ✓ AAP guidance says children need to learn that mistakes and failures are normal parts of learning and can be used constructively.¹
- ✓ School-age children build confidence through mastery experiences such as learning a skill or reaching a goal they helped set.²
- ✓ Persistent academic struggles can reflect learning, behavioral, psychological, or other factors and should be discussed with school and health professionals.³

Research Sources

1. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Building Blocks for Healthy Self Esteem in Kids.” [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/healthychildren/1-to-2-year-olds/Building-Blocks-for-Healthy-Self-Esteem-in-Kids.aspx). Updated July 24, 2024.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Creating Positive Experiences for School-Age Children.” [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/healthychildren/13-to-18-years/Creating-Positive-Experiences-for-School-Age-Children.aspx). Updated March 31, 2024.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics. “What to Do If Your Child is Falling Behind in School.” [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/healthychildren/13-to-18-years/What-to-Do-If-Your-Child-is-Falling-Behind-in-School.aspx).

Ten-Minute “Not Yet” Confidence Reset

Use this page after a discouraging school moment. The goal is to separate one difficulty from the child’s identity.

Child’s name: _____

Date: _____

School concern: _____

Subject: _____

1. Name What Happened - About 2 Minutes

Describe the event without labels such as “bad at school” or “not smart.”

What happened: _____

2. Find What Is Already Working - About 2 Minutes

Identify one part the child understands, completed, or handled appropriately.

One thing I can already do: _____

3. Name the Skill to Build - About 2 Minutes

Turn the problem into one specific skill that can be practiced or taught.

Skill to build: _____

4. Choose One Next Action - About 2 Minutes

Choose one manageable next step: practice, correct, ask, or request help.

My next action: _____

5. Use Accurate Encouragement - About 2 Minutes

Use accurate encouragement that recognizes effort and progress.

What Parents Can Say: “This is hard right now, and you are learning.”