

When Your Child Gives Up Too Quickly

A child who gives up quickly may be avoiding frustration, protecting against failure, unsure how to begin, or facing a task that is genuinely beyond current skill. Before labeling the child as unmotivated, look at what happens at the moment of quitting. Is the work unclear? Does the child stop after one mistake? Does help arrive so quickly that there is little reason to persist? APA guidance for families notes that children tend to persist and learn better when they believe their abilities can grow.¹ Use language that connects effort, strategies, and improvement without pretending that effort guarantees immediate success. “You do not know how to do this yet” is more useful than “This is easy.” Persistence also depends on self-regulation. Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child explains that executive-function and self-regulation skills develop through interactions and practice, with adults initially providing support and gradually stepping back.² Give enough help to make the next step possible, not enough to remove the challenge. Try a three-part response: name the stuck point, choose one strategy, and require one more reasonable attempt. For example: “You are stuck on the first step. Let’s look at the example. Then you try the next problem.” Praise the process that the child can repeat: rereading directions, asking a specific question, breaking the task into parts, checking an example, or returning after a brief break. Recent WWC behavioral guidance supports positive acknowledgment, instructional choices, and teaching children to monitor and reflect on their own behavior.³ Let the child record what strategy worked. Over time, reduce prompts so the child begins to say, “I’m stuck; what can I try?” If quitting happens mainly in one academic area, bring examples to the teacher. Persistent avoidance may be signaling a skill gap that needs instruction rather than more pressure.

Did You Know?

- ✓ APA guidance notes that children tend to persist and learn better when they believe abilities can grow rather than being fixed.¹
- ✓ Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child describes adult scaffolding followed by gradual independence as a way children practice executive-function and self-regulation skills.²
- ✓ WWC’s 2024 behavioral practice guide supports positive acknowledgment, instructional choice, and student self-monitoring to increase engagement and self-regulation.³

Research Sources

1. American Psychological Association. “Top 10 Principles from Psychology for Families to Help Children Learn and Succeed in School.”
2. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. “Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence.”
3. Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. “Teacher-Delivered Behavioral Interventions in Grades K–5.” Released December 2024.

Ten-Minute Try-Again Plan

Use this page when your child is ready to quit. The goal is one reasonable next attempt using a strategy the child can learn to choose independently.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Task: _____ Stuck point: _____

1. Name the Stuck Point - About 2 Minutes

Describe the exact place the task stopped instead of labeling the child.

I am stuck because: _____

2. Choose One Strategy - About 2 Minutes

Select one action that makes the next step possible.

☐ Reread directions ☐ Look at example ☐ Break it down ☐ Ask one question

3. Try One More Step - About 3 Minutes

Have the child make one reasonable attempt before more help is added.

The next step I tried: _____

4. Notice What Worked - About 2 Minutes

Name the strategy or behavior that helped, even if the entire task is not finished.

What helped: _____

5. Build Independence - About 1 Minute

Have the child choose the first strategy to try next time.

Next time I get stuck, I will first: _____

What Parents Can Say: "You were frustrated, chose a strategy, and tried again."