

Children persist less when parents take over

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Watching a child show off newly mastered shoe-tying skills is often an exercise in parental patience. The normally quick task seems endless, particularly when motivated by any sort of underlying rush. But, according to research from the University of Pennsylvania, adults should resist the urge to step in—advice that goes far beyond tying shoes.

According to an [observational study](#) and two experiments conducted by psychologist Allyson Mackey and postdoctoral fellow Julia Leonard, children persist less when adults take over, findings the researchers published in the journal *Child Development*.

The work piggybacked on research from Leonard on how adults' actions, outcomes, and words affect whether preschoolers persist through challenges or give up. "We're trying to figure out which factors kids pay attention to when calibrating their effort," she says. "We've previously showed that what made kids try hardest is watching an adult's hard work lead to achievement, especially when that adult speaks to the value of the effort."

For Mackey, an assistant professor in Penn's Department of Psychology who runs The Changing Brain Lab, the latest study also stemmed partly from personal experience. "I have a 5-year-old and 1-year-old, and I take over all the time. The emotional task of watching them get really frustrated is hard," she says. "I just hadn't thought about the message I'd been sending to them, which really amounts to, "I don't think you can do it, so I'm just going to do it for you." We now have empirical evidence that that's a problem."

An observation and two experiments

To start the research, Mackey and Leonard first asked parents to report on what they perceived as their child's level of persistence outside of a lab setting. Then, to determine which parenting practices correlated with this trait, the parent-child duo worked together on several challenging puzzles. "We coded how encouraging parents were or whether they told their children to quit, for example," Mackey says. "We also coded when a parent actually took over and solved the puzzle by physically placing the pieces."

The idea was to better understand why one young child might more willingly struggle to complete a challenging task than another, she says. "Maybe parents who are not especially patient have kids who are not patient. We wanted to see if we could find a causal relationship."

That led to two experiments in partnership with the Please Touch Museum, a children's museum in Philadelphia that features interactive exhibits. In the first, the researchers randomly assigned 90 4- and 5-year-olds to one of three groups: a "taking over" condition, a "teaching" condition, or a control.

An experimenter demonstrated to those in the taking-over and teaching groups how to put together a block puzzle, then asked each child to do it on different, new puzzles. Next, depending on assigned group, the adult either stepped in and finished the puzzle or helped the child figure out how to complete it without physically moving any pieces. This process happened twice. The experiment concluded with children in all three groups receiving a wooden box with something rattling inside.

"The puzzle box was glued shut, so it was secretly impossible to open. We wanted to see how long kids would try," Mackey says. "The kids in the taking-over group persisted far less than those in the teaching or control groups. That tells us it's not hard to demotivate kids."

A second experiment aimed to determine how easily such discouragement could be undone. "We realized how often we take over in our own lives," Leonard says, "and we understand that sometimes you kind of need to do this as a parent, so we wanted to find out, can you take over without crushing the other person?"

To test this, the researchers piloted the idea of explaining to the children that they were in a rush. That proved disastrous, according to Mackey. Shifting gears, they randomly assigned 60 4- and 5-year-olds to a "taking

over" or "taking turns" condition. Much like in the first study, an experimenter demonstrated two puzzles, then asked the child to complete them, stepping in after 10 seconds. For the taking-turns group, however, the experimenter stated out loud before finishing the puzzle that it was her turn. The trial again ended with the impossible-to-open box.

"Taking turns helped a little bit but not significantly," Mackey says. "In other words, if you tell children why you need to take over and it's because you're taking turns, they persist a little longer."

Importance today

In the era of COVID-19, this school year looks starkly different from years past, with many families having faced what amounts to home-schooling at least some of the time. That also means [parents](#) have probably seen their children struggle, likely with concepts the adults themselves already grasp.

"Even knowing this work, it's hard for me not to take over," Mackey says. "You might have a hard time watching your kids learn new skills, but this research shows us that it's important to let them struggle. If you start to do their math for them, they might learn they don't have to do it themselves." That doesn't mean not providing help and support when it's necessary, she says.

In those situations, Leonard suggests counting to 10. "Figure out the context. Do you think your child could do this with a little more time or if you offered some hints? If so, wait a bit longer. Have confidence in your child's ability to learn and know that often struggling is part of the process. If you really think it's beyond their capabilities though, step in. You don't want your child to feel unsupported."

This work discovered a causal relationship between a real-world parenting behavior and a child's motivation. It also provided important future research cues. Mackey says, for example, that she'd like to study which interventions might change the adult behavior and whether the finding extends to interactions between adults.

Additional work could also focus on whether it matters how long the parent waits to take over and whether children interpret this action differently depending on the task at hand, Leonard says. Perhaps something like shoe-tying requires more of a joint effort between parent and child, or maybe the parent's word choices make the difference. "There's so much nuance to all of this and many questions yet to answer," she says. "But right now, our work suggests that letting children struggle a bit actually boosts their persistence. So, when you can, step back, take a few deep breaths, and have confidence in your [child's](#) journey."

More information: Julia A. Leonard et al. Children Persist Less When Adults Take Over, *Child Development* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13492](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13492)

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