

Question: I have an almost two-year-old daughter who gets so frustrated when things are hard for her, like when a toy won't turn on or if her cup is out of reach. I hate to listen to her cry, so I end up just giving in to her and doing things for her. How can I encourage her to stay motivated to do things on her own?

Toddlers go back and forth between wanting to be big, grown-up and do things on their own to wanting to be carried and babied. They are trying to do so much that is new, it is no wonder that they get frustrated. It is a natural instinct for you to want to keep your child from getting upset. You can help her begin to learn to handle her frustration by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

As a parent, it makes sense to want to prevent your child from experiencing any stress in her life, but this is neither possible nor helpful. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children, says:

A childhood that had no stress in it would not prepare you for adulthood. If you never allow your children to exceed what they can do, how are they going to learn to manage adult life—where a lot of it is managing more than you thought you could manage?

A normal childhood has challenges in it—where children feel like, "Oh, maybe I'm going to fail" or "Maybe this won't work"... [W]e need to help our children understand how to manage themselves, but not protect them completely from those challenges.

When you see these frustrating moments as helping your daughter learn to take on challenges—by having a mindset that you are supporting really supporting her—it helps you step back and stop trying to fix everything so she never gets upset.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Give your child some control.

Megan Gunnar's studies have revealed that having a sense of control helps children manage their emotions so they can take on difficult situations. Help your child develop tools for dealing with her emotions and behavior. Eventually, she will be able to use these strategies on her own.

- The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests parents help their children feel capable and in control by letting them make choices. In situations where she easily gets frustrated, limit your child's options to two choices, both of which are okay with you. For example, if she is crying because she can't reach her coat, you can say something like: "I can lift you up, or we can find a sweater in your drawer."

The research of Nathan Fox of the University of Maryland has demonstrated that parenting style makes a difference in how children react in difficult situations. When parents are constantly warning their child of potential dangers, their children are more likely to become anxious or fearful. Fox suggests that parents help children learn to control their emotions by building on their children's strategies for managing and by communicating positive messages to their children.

2

Don't jump in immediately.

Don't be afraid to let your child struggle just a little bit if she can do something by herself. Simply by being there, you are showing her that you believe that she can do things, even when they are hard. The littlest moments can be great opportunities for your child to attempt to try things independently in a safe and supportive environment.

- See what happens if you let your child try to do something on her own that is safe, but a little challenging, like putting on her shoes. When she asks you for help, give it to her. If she can't yet use words to express her feelings, you can express these feelings for her: "You got upset when you couldn't put your shoes on. Learning to do new things takes time. I will help you now and soon you will learn to do this by yourself."
- If you'd like your child to try a little harder before you step in, build on the typical toddler's love of helping adults. Try saying: "Can you show me how to do it?" or "I need your help."
- Take turns. You can serve as a supportive model for your child and demonstrate how to do something: "I will put in the first piece of the puzzle. Then, it will be your turn to try."
- Step in if you feel like your child is becoming too frustrated. You want her to have positive experiences with facing challenges so that she will continue to take them on, not turn away from them. When you step in, though, tell her that you know she will be able to learn to handle this situation in the future.

A review of the research on stress and children by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (based at Harvard University) states that the stresses caused by everyday challenges are positive as long as the child has the support that he or she needs to master these situations. Learning to adjust to this kind of experience, they write, is "an essential feature of healthy development."

3

Find opportunities for your child to do things on her own.

Build up your child's confidence in trying hard things by involving her in safe and simple daily routines and activities that she can do. Your child's self-esteem grows each time she feels successful in doing something that adults do, too. Some ideas are to:

- Ask your child to help you wipe tables or to bring spoons to the sink.

- Give your child her own bag when you go shopping. Let her put safe, easy-to-carry items inside it and bring it with her through the store.
- Have your child help you put clothes in the washer or dryer.

According to Carol Dweck of Stanford University, when you encourage your child to be persistent in trying something hard, you are building her brain:

[T]he brain is like a muscle—it gets stronger with use ... [E]very time [children] work hard, their brain forms new connections.

4

Praise your child's efforts.

By celebrating her efforts as she learns to do things on her own, you help your child find motivation and joy in the process of taking on a challenge, rather than doing things simply to get praise from others. Instead of praising her personality or intelligence, help her see other strategies she can use to learn more.

- Use phrases specific to what your child is doing. Instead of saying things like: "Good job!" or "You're so smart!" try: "You are working so hard to climb up the stairs. Let's see what happens if you hold the railing."
- Make sure to celebrate your child's accomplishments, no matter how small. In an excited voice, say: "You did it!" Give your child a hug or a high-five to reinforce her confidence and self-esteem.

5

Encourage your child to ask for help with words, instead of crying or getting upset.

- When she starts to whine, say: "Use words. I can't help you unless you tell me what you want." If she is too upset to talk, give her words, such as: "Do you want me to pick you up?" Or say: "You are really trying to put on your shoe, and it's hard. It seems like you need help. Do you want me to help you?" Wait for her to respond with a word or a nod.
- Recognize when your child does ask you for help: "You asked for help. Here I am!"

6

Make it fun!

Keep a sense of humor, and help your child make challenges fun. Try incorporating play and music as strategies to help your child move past frustration and start resolving problems. Some ideas are to:

- Pretend to be an animal or vehicle to motivate your child through her imagination. Try things like: "Can you go as fast as a racecar to clean up your toys?" Or: "Let's be elephants and use our long trunks to reach for the cup."

For more ways to help your child learn and develop, visit
mindinthemaking.org and vroom.org

MIND in the Making
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

- Sing songs about what you are doing to keep your child's attention and to encourage her to keep going. Use familiar songs and add new words or create an original song. Your child loves to hear your voice, and, when you use a singsong tone, she pays closer attention to what you are saying. Music can also be soothing and help your child calm down.