



# Encourage a Can-Do Attitude about Academics

By Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D.

When we look at our children, we see possibilities and potential. We envision growth, learning and success. Even if our kids are struggling right now, the future looks bright from a parents' perspective.

But kids don't always see themselves through the same set of lenses. A recent study by psychologist Kristin Lagattuta, Ph.D., and her colleagues found parents consistently underestimated kids' worries and overestimated their optimism. Being assigned to a lower-level reading group or getting a poor report card may cause a lot of anxiety. Since kids don't have the same skills and perspective as adults, they may not see a way out of their current situation.

## Beware of Mixed Signals

Reality TV shows and overnight success stories reinforce the idea that some people have talent and others do not. Psychologist Carol Dweck, Ph.D., calls this a fixed view of ability. Kids who adopt a fixed mindset believe they've already got all the smarts they'll ever have. (How depressing!) These kids choose easy tasks because they don't think they can improve with repeated practice. If they don't succeed right away, kids with a fixed mindset give up. They see failure as proof that they don't have what it takes, not as a signal to invest more effort or try another approach.

Parents may inadvertently reinforce a fixed mindset in their attempts to boost kids' optimism and self-confidence. Statements like "You're so smart!" or "Math is easy for you!" sound positive on the surface. But they suggest kids should not have to try too hard to do well. As academics become more difficult, kids who believed "I am smart" and "School is easy" may begin to question their own abilities. Some kids start to doubt their smarts in elementary school, others lose confidence in college. At any age, the belief that you don't have the right stuff can be devastating.

## Build a Can-Do Attitude

You can help your child develop an optimistic learning mindset. Use these simple strategies to help your child set goals, build skills and overcome setbacks. Persistent practice is the key to academic success.

**Talk Up Opportunities.** Each morning, discuss upcoming events with your child. Share your anticipation about a meeting you have at work. Say "I'll have a chance to present my ideas," or "I can practice speaking in front of a large group." Encourage your child to share her coming events as well. Focus on what you both can learn instead of what you could lose.

**Tell Kids Learning is Difficult.** A series of studies by French psychologists Frédérique Autin and Jean-Claude Croizet found sixth-grade students who were told learning is hard and failure is common performed better on subsequent academic tests, even after they'd failed to solve a single problem in the initial set. Establish the expectation that learning is a challenge and many students struggle. Remind your child that practice helps build new skills: no one is born knowing how to multiply fractions or how to spell "catastrophe." This relieves the pressure kids feel to prove they're smart already.

**Affirm Effort.** Instead of highlighting talents and triumphs, recognize hard work. Say "You are such a dedicated student," or "I am so proud that you kept trying when you didn't get the answer right away." These statements buoy kids' self-esteem and encourage them to keep trying.

**Take Risks.** Kids need to see parents step outside our comfort zones once in a while. Try new things that don't come easily. Learn a foreign language. Run a race. Introduce yourself to new people. Model the kind of courage you want for your child. And if things don't go as well as you'd hoped, zero in on what you learned. Every setback has a silver lining.

**Reframe Limiting Beliefs.** Your child isn't likely to improve his grades if he believes he failed a test because he's dumb. A specific, situational explanation like "I failed because I didn't understand the vocabulary" or "I didn't use the study guide" moves your child in the right direction. Ask guiding questions like "What can you do differently next time?" to help your child make the switch.

**Build Skills.** Create a step-by-step plan to help your child develop new skills. Read books or watch how-to videos together. Create opportunities for her to practice in situations that aren't too scary, like rehearsing a speech in front of the family dog. Once she's developed basic skills and confidence, move on to more challenging situations.

**Highlight Improvement.** Learning is a process. Encourage a growth mindset by commenting on your child's progress, not his grades. Say "You really improved on your math facts," or "Your essay has become much more organized since I saw the rough draft." Use a simple chart to track improvement and remind him of how far he's come. The best confidence boost you can give your child is the belief that he can learn anything, if he puts his mind to it.

Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D. is a personality psychologist, former educator, and mom of two. She shares psychology lessons for real life at [HeidiLuedtke.com](http://HeidiLuedtke.com)

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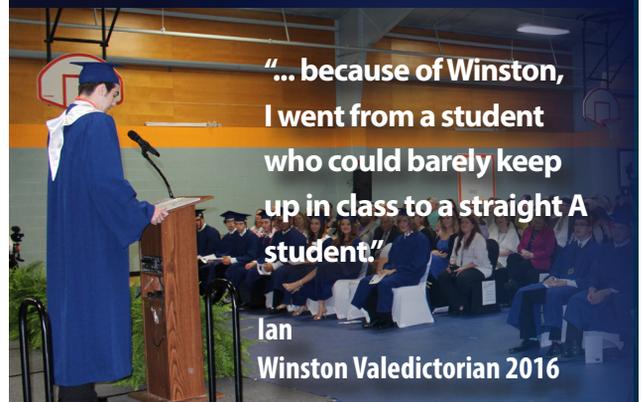
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