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"I Will Do My Very Best!" Children Who Engage in Positive Self-Talk About Effort Can Boost Their Math Achievement

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Effort Self-Talk Benefits the Mathematics Performance of Children with Negative Competence Beliefs

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Children who think poorly of themselves often underachieve in school. A new Dutch study tested whether a simple mental activity—having children with low self-confidence say favorable, encouraging words to themselves—could boost their achievement. The study found that children who engaged in this kind of self-talk improved their math performance when the talk focused on effort, not ability.

The study was done by researchers at Utrecht University, the University of Applied Sciences Leiden, the University of Amsterdam, and the University of Southampton. It appears in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

“Parents and teachers are often advised to encourage children to repeat positive selfstatements at stressful times, such as when they’re taking academic tests,” notes Sander Thomaes, professor of psychology at Utrecht University, who led the study. “But until now, we didn’t have a good idea of whether this helped children’s achievement. We discovered that children with low self-confidence can improve their performance through self-talk focused on effort, a self-regulation strategy that children can do by themselves every day.”

Researchers examined 212 children in grades 4 to 6 (ages 9 to 13 years) from schools in middle-class communities in the Netherlands. They chose this age because in late childhood, negative perceptions of competence on school tasks become increasingly prevalent. The children were instructed to take a math test because math performance is compromised by negative beliefs about one’s competence.

In the study, the children first reported their beliefs about their competence. A few days later, they worked in their classrooms on the first half of a standardized math test. Immediately after completing the first half of the test, they were randomly assigned to silently take part in either self-talk focused on effort (e.g., “I will do my very best!”), self-talk focused on ability (“I am very good at this!”), or no self-talk. Afterwards, they

completed the second half of the math test.

Children who took part in self-talk focused on effort improved their performance on the test compared to children who did not engage in self-talk focused on effort. The benefits of selftalk were especially pronounced among children who held negative beliefs about their competence. In contrast, children who engaged in self-talk focused on ability did not improve their math scores, regardless of their beliefs about their competence.

“Our study found that the math performance of children with low self-confidence benefits when they tell themselves that they will make an effort,” explains Eddie Brummelman, assistant professor of child development at the University of Amsterdam, who coauthored the study. “We did not find the same result among children with low self-confidence who spoke to themselves about ability. Self-talk about effort is the key.”

The authors note that their findings apply only to children in fourth to sixth grades and may not be applicable to children of other ages. They also note that the study was done in the Netherlands, and that children’s response to self-talk may differ in other countries and cultures.

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Summarized from *Child Development, Effort Self-Talk Benefits the Mathematics Performance of Children with Negative Competence Beliefs*, by Thomaes, S (Utrecht University), Tjaarda, IC (Utrecht University and University of Applied Sciences Leiden), Brummelman, E (University of Amsterdam), and Sedikides, C (University of Southampton). Copyright 2019 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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