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Study: Adults' Actions, Successes, Failures, and Words Affect Young Children's Persistence

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How Adults' Actions, Outcomes, and Testimony Affect Preschoolers' Persistence

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Children's persistence in the face of challenges is key to learning and academic success. However, we know little about how parents and educators can help foster persistent behavior in children before they begin formal schooling. A new U.S. study looked at the interactions of preschool age children with adults to determine how they affected the children's persistence. It found that the efforts adults put into their actions, successes and failures, and words affected children's persistent behavior to differing degrees.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It appears in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

"Our work shows that young children pay attention to the successes and failures of the adults around them and, reasonably, don't persist long at tasks that adults themselves fail to achieve," notes Julia A. Leonard, MindCore postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, who led the study. "However, we found that when adults could complete a task successfully, speaking about the value of the effort and letting children see the hard work that went into achieving the goal, it encouraged persistence in children who were watching."

Researchers examined how the persistence of 520 children ages 4 and 5 years was affected by their observations of adults' actions (whether they put a lot of or a little effort into an action) and the outcomes of those actions (whether the adults succeeded or failed in their efforts). The children were from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. The study also looked at how persistence was affected by adults' words: whether they set expectations for the children's attempts at a task that was designed to be impossible to complete. For example, adults told the children: "This will be hard," gave pep talks by saying something like "You can do this," or offered value statements by saying, for example, "Trying hard is important." There was also a condition in which adults did not say anything about children's expectations. Persistence was measured by how hard the children chose to work at the same task attempted by the adults,

which was difficult and new to the children.

Children heard adults' comments without seeing an adult demonstrate the tasks or after seeing an adult demonstrate either high or low effort at the task, then succeed or fail.

The study found:

- Children tried harder after they saw adults succeed than after they saw them fail at a task.
- Adults' efforts affected children's persistence, but only when the adults succeeded at their task.
- Children's persistence was highest when adults exerted effort at their task, succeeded, and talked about the value of making that effort.

According to the authors, these findings show that young children are attentively watching the adults around them and actively learning from their words, efforts, and outcomes how hard they themselves should try at tasks. The study suggests that to encourage children's persistence, adults should show children how hard work leads to success by demonstrating this in their own actions and by speaking about the value of effort.

"Our study suggests that children are rational learners—they pay attention first and foremost to whether adults succeed at their goals," says Laura Schulz, professor of cognitive science at MIT, who coauthored the study. "But when adults succeed, children are also watching how hard adults try and what adults say about the value of effort."

The study was supported by the National Science Foundation and the Center for Minds, Brains, and Machines.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, *How Adults' Actions, Outcomes, and Testimony Affect Preschoolers' Persistence*, by Leonard, JA (University of Pennsylvania), Garcia, A (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and Schulz, LE (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Copyright 2019 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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