
HOW TO RAISE A KID WHO WON'T QUIT

by: Hank Pellissier

Persistence is a hot topic among education researchers these days and for good reason: It's critical for success in school and beyond. Here are 8 tips for nurturing this quality in your child.

- 1. Let them play:** Just like adults, kids tend to work harder when they love what they're doing. What's the best way to help your child discover what they're passionate about? Let them explore freely and widely. "Before those who've yet to fix on a passion are ready to spend hours a day diligently honing skills, they must goof around, triggering and retriggering interest," writes Duckworth in *Grit*. Exploring the world through family outings, media, exhibits, new people, and extracurricular clubs, classes, and lessons can spark lifelong interests. To form an enduring passion, Duckworth claims, that first spark of interest needs to be followed by many subsequent encounters that will trigger and retrigger your child's attention. So if your child's curiosity is piqued by any topic from acrobatics to zoology, you can support their nascent interest by offering additional exposure to that subject. Note that this does not mean packing your child's every waking moment with scheduled activity; make sure they have plenty of (screen-free) downtime to fill with self-chosen projects of creative discovery.
- 2. Help them practice self-control:** Self-control is the quality that comes into play when your child has two possible actions to choose from, one that promises immediate pleasure, the other not as pleasurable in the moment but that serves a more distant goal. Post to Instagram or practice piano? Play a video game or study for a math test? Perhaps not surprisingly, self-control is closely related to the ability to work toward a goal over time. Studies have shown that higher levels of self-control early in life predict how well kids do academically, as well as a host of other positive outcomes including adult earnings, savings, and physical health. While researchers aren't clear exactly how self-control and grit are related (it's possible to have one without the other), the good news is that self-control can be learned. Playing games like Red Light, Green Light and Simon Says, rewarding kids for delayed gratification, making sure kids get enough sleep, and limiting their TV-watching are all associated with helping kids develop the ability to control their impulses, which may translate to an ability later to resist the siren call of their smartphone and focus on that history essay.

3. Aim high: Many studies have shown that kids work harder and do better when their teachers/parents have high expectations for them. High achievers who persevere in the face of challenges tend to come from families with high standards for their academic success and a home environment that supports learning. Healthy achievement doesn't arise simply out of high expectations but, paradoxically, out of feeling secure, notes Diana Divecha, developmental psychologist and researcher with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "Opportunities to stretch, opportunities to be trusted and respected, and the experience of being supported when necessary all help to foster a child's belief in success. And of course keep your priorities straight and reassure them of your love no matter the outcome," she says.

4. Praise the process: If you want to raise a kid who is eager to take on challenges and is not deterred by obstacles, don't praise him for being smart; it may make him reluctant to try something harder for fear that if he fails, it will reveal that he isn't so smart after all. The research of Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success*, shows that when children are praised for their intelligence or talents, they avoid challenges and are less resilient in the face of difficulty. But when children are praised for hard work that paid off, they are more likely to seek out challenges and keep going when things get tough. They are more motivated, more persistent, and more successful. Switching from person-praise to process-praise is easy: just refer to what the child did, not who they are. Compliment the carefulness of the sewing project, the gutsy attentiveness displayed in the basketball game, the well-organized time management used in studying for the final exam.

5. Encourage goals big and small: Helping your child set short-, medium-, and long-term goals that resonate with their personal values and interests can teach them persistence, according to Duckworth in *Grit*. An example of a short-term goal for your sixth grade daughter might be an A on her science final, a medium-term goal could be winning a medal in a city or state science fair and a long-term goal would be receiving a science scholarship to attend college. Your child's goals should be in what educators call the "optimal zone" – not too easy, not too hard, but just right. Research shows that hard goals can help your child focus their attention, work harder, and develop strategic thinking. But if a goal is so difficult that it's beyond their ability to achieve, they may be setting themselves up for anxiety.





6. Extracurriculars help: Activities outside of regular school hours, such as sports, drama, debate, Scouts, or music, are a great context for learning how to work hard at something over time. New York Times columnist Bruce Feiler, author of *The Secrets of Happy Families*, writes that Michelle Obama made each of her daughters take up two sports – one she chose and one they chose, so that they would have the experience of working at something they may not necessarily like and seeing improvement. Research shows that students who participate in extracurricular activities get better grades and have higher self-esteem, lower rates of depression, and lower dropout rates than students who don't. Kids who devote more than one year to the same activity are more likely to graduate from college; and sticking with the same activity for two years or more increases their odds of employment soon after college.

7. Imagine that: When it comes to developing tenacity, studies show that visualizing a future goal – and the potential obstacles to achieving it – really works. In one study, high school students were instructed to imagine a desired future outcome and then visualize possible obstacles to that outcome. The exercise improved high school students' persistence in studying for the PSAT. In another study, kids were asked to visualize a possible adult version of themselves. Next they listed positive and negative forces that could help or derail their progress toward becoming that person, along with strategies for success. Two years later, students who had participated in the exercise spent more time on their homework and had higher GPAs than kids in the control group. Our takeaway? When kids spend time visualizing where they want to be and how they'll get there, they're more likely to work hard.

8. Do a style check: How would you describe your parenting style? Permissive? Hands-off? Authoritarian? Research suggests that your parenting style can affect how determined your child is. Spoiler alert: An authoritative parenting style, one that's firm yet warm, seems to be the sweet spot. Myriad studies indicate that kids with authoritative parents have more positive outcomes, from less drug use to greater well-being. And research suggests that the authoritative style, with its high expectations and high responsiveness, has the greatest effect on academic success. Authoritarian parents may make more decisions for their child, while permissive parents may lean toward letting kids figure it out on their own – in both cases, missing opportunities to help kids learn how to make good decisions. An authoritative parenting style is one that guides – children of authoritative parents are instructed to think carefully, weighing their options and consequences. These children obtain an advantage in developing self-confidence, willpower, and self-discipline – qualities associated with a gritty character.