Character Traits for School Success

Character traits like grit, perseverance, confidence, and courage can help your child do well in every school subject. Whether he's solving a tough math problem or giving a class presentation, the following tips will inspire your youngster to rise to challenges.

Use real-life examples

Seeing how others have overcome hurdles or been brave enough to face their fears shows your child that it can be done. And recognizing his own abilities encourages him to draw on them in the future.

- Let your youngster "interview" someone who has worked hard toward an achievement. Maybe a neighbor placed first in a 4-H contest he was afraid to enter or an aunt graduated from college after going back at an older age. Your child could ask questions like, "What was your biggest obstacle?" and "What kept you motivated?" He might share what he learned over dinner or even write a story about the person.

- Take your after-school conversations a step further by asking your youngster not only what he learned but also how he showed positive character traits. You could say, "Tell me about something you did that took courage." Maybe he raised his hand during math although he wasn't 100% sure he knew the right answer. Or ask, "What did you persevere at?" Perhaps he finished writing a report on a topic that was difficult for him.

Improve a little at a time

How do you climb a mountain? One step at a time. Focusing on small improvements will help your child reach a whole new level—and teach her to be patient even when she doesn't see results right away.

Mistakes are okay!

What do bubble wrap and a Slinky have in common? Both were failed inventions that later became popular products! Have your youngster research a favorite invention. She's likely to discover that trial and error led to its success. Knowing that mistakes are normal will give her the courage to tackle a project, for example, and the perseverance to keep going. *Tip:* Discuss your own mistakes and how you move on from them.

- Encourage your youngster to stretch just beyond what she can already do. She'll bump up her skills a notch without becoming so frustrated she'll want to give up. For instance, she might pick a library book that's slightly more advanced than she's used to reading—but not one that's five times harder.

- If your child is upset and says she can't do something, suggest that she add the word *yet*. ("I can't do division—*yet*," or "I can't jump rope—*yet*.") She'll begin to believe that she will master the skill one day soon.

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Set meaningful goals

Working toward long-term goals will strengthen your youngster's "character muscles" in different ways. She'll need to be brave to aim for a target. She'll have to dig in with grit to stick with it until the end. And she'll develop confidence when she sees she's capable of reaching her goals.

- What does your child want to achieve? Ask her to set two or three goals she could meet in a reasonable period of time. Have her put them in writing, along with a plan for meeting each one.
- She'll be more likely to finish what she starts if her goals are specific and she gives herself a deadline. *Examples:* "I will complete and turn in all homework on time for the rest of the school year." "I will learn to knit, and I'll finish a scarf by the first day of winter."

Handle emotions

As your child works through difficult situations, he may experience feelings like fear, embarrassment, and aggravation. Knowing how to cope will help him get beyond them and keep going.

- The way your youngster looks at something can make the difference between his wanting to quit or to continue. Say he's disappointed because he missed throwing a runner out at home plate during his baseball game. Remind him of the last time he made a good play—and have him visualize himself doing it again next game. That will make him feel more in control and boost his confidence.
- Show your child how to use humor to put things in perspective and relieve stress. Maybe he's frustrated because he misplaced a permission slip and he has looked everywhere. You might say, "I bet it's hiding with the lost socks!" Then, help him think of ways to solve the problem. Perhaps he could ask the bus driver if he left it on the bus, or a friend will let him make a copy.

Take *good* risks

When your youngster ventures beyond his comfort zone in safe ways, he learns new skills, boosts his self-confidence, and taps into courage he didn't know he had. Here are three kinds of healthy risks.

1. Give your child opportunities to take *physical risks* by trying different outdoor activities. Encourage him to learn to ride a bike or dive into the pool. Or he might climb on bigger playground equipment or hike a steep trail with you.

2. Suggest that your youngster take *social risks* by inviting someone he doesn't know very well over to play or approaching a new classmate at recess. Also, tell him it's okay to share his opinion, politely, when he works in a group, even if he doesn't agree with the others.

3. Let your child practice taking *emotional risks* through extracurricular activities. Say he auditions for a speaking part in the school play. Being chosen will build his confidence. If he's not picked, he might ask the play director about other ways to contribute, like making props or helping with stage lights. He'll learn that he can recover from disappointment.

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