

Question: I notice that when my preschooler comes up against a challenging task, like completing a difficult puzzle, she tends to want to walk away and give up or to try to get me to finish her work for her. How can I help her to be curious, stay engaged and not give up so easily when she has difficulty figuring something out?

There are many things we can do to encourage curiosity and persistence by promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

1

Encourage your child to explore, to ask questions, to be curious.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests appreciating your child's investigative nature and avoiding excessively restricting explorations. Guide your child through fun learning experiences.

Craig Ramey of Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute says:

We think of explorers as the people who get into spaceships and go into outer space or the people who generations ago got into boats and went across the ocean. Well, every child is an explorer because children always have first experiences with the most [basic] things in the world. [These] may be old hat to us, but [they're] brand-new to them. The parents who can keep that enthusiasm for discovery [alive], who say, "Go ahead and try something a little bit more—take the risk," [have children who] later in life are likely to come up with novel insights, new ways to do things and solve problems.

When your child asks questions, she is trying to figure things out. You can keep the back and forth conversation going by asking her questions and by drawing her attention to things that she may be curious about. For example:

- "What do you think would happen if you pushed that toy under water in the bathtub?" or "What do you think the dog is trying to tell us by barking?"
- "Your question is interesting. What are your ideas about what the answers might be?"

2

Be a role model of curiosity.

Children have a drive to understand the world around them—to figure things out. If you show that you are interested in learning new things, in figuring things out and in wondering, then your child is likely to follow your lead.

3

Don't answer your child's questions too quickly or do things for your child.

Laura Schulz of MIT has found that children lose interest more quickly when adults tell them the answers to their questions than when they let them continue to explore.

When your daughter asks a question, see if she could figure out the answer by herself, acting like a scientist and conducting an experiment. For example, if she notices that butter melts on the toast, ask whether that is always true, and see if butter melts on toast that is cold or just on toast that is hot.

4

Work up to harder problems—stretch your child, but not too far.

Give your daughter easier puzzles at first, and, as she succeeds in doing those, make the puzzles a little bit harder. Think of this as stretching your child just a little above what she has done before. If you take over and do things for your child (like finishing the puzzle), the message to your daughter is that you can do the puzzle, but she can't. Instead, help her figure out how to do the puzzle.

5

Provide clues when your child is trying to figure out something.

In helping your child figure out how to do the puzzle, provide clues such as,

- "This part of the picture is blue. Do you see other puzzle pieces that are blue?"
- "This shape is curved. Do you see any places on the puzzle where a curved shape might fit?"

6

Praise children for their strategies, not their personalities.

Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that if adults praise children's efforts—"You are working hard!"—rather than their intelligence—"You are so smart!"—children are more likely to try hard things, or, in Dweck's words, "love challenge."

When your child is working hard, you can say:

- "You are using many different ways to figure out how to do this puzzle, like finding colors that go together."
- "When something you try doesn't work, you keep trying. That is the way you learn new things."