

MIT Scientists Say Let Them Watch You Do This (But Most Parents Are Afraid To)



Science says children as young as 15 months old can learn to become more resilient--but only if you're willing to show them this. What does MIT say?

By Bill Murphy Jr. *Executive editor of operations, Some Spider*



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Imagine you're a parent. You want the best for your children--and you're convinced, based on science, that it's very important for them to learn grit and tenacity. So, you work hard to make sure that you praise your kids the right way--always for their efforts, never for their innate characteristics and abilities. Perhaps you also try to show them that hard work will always pay off--and maybe make yourself feel better in front of them--by hiding your struggles and highlighting your successes.

Hold on there a minute, say researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

It turns out there's potentially a big advantage in showing your children just how hard you struggle to reach any goal. And, according to new research, children as young as 15 months old may benefit from it.

Here's the MIT study, the results, and how it fits into the larger body of research about teaching children to be resilient achievers.

The struggle is real

Researchers at **MIT** conducted a series of experiments with very young children, in which they tried to determine whether demonstrating adult resilience could have an impact on how hard the children would work at an age-appropriate task.

The experiments involved two stages. Children averaging 15 months old would start by watching adults, as the adults tried to solve tasks like opening a container and or removing keys from a carabiner.

Sometimes, in what the researchers called the *Effort* condition, the adults would demonstrate struggling to accomplish the tasks before ultimately prevailing at around the 30 second mark. Other times, in what the researchers called the *No Effort* condition, the adults demonstrated solving the tasks quickly. (There was also a *Baseline* condition, which skipped this first part of the experiment.)

Then, the researchers gave the children a toy that could play music--if they children could find a hidden on/off switch. Researchers studied how long the toddlers would look for the switch, or else try to turn on a decoy button, before either giving the toy to an adult for help or simply throwing it on the floor.

As you might guess, of the 262 children in the experiment, the ones who had watched an adult demonstrate resilience were consistently willing to try longer to get the toy to work.

The power of mindset

Okay, so this is one study--interesting, but involving toddlers and under some unusual circumstances to say the least. But, it's all of a piece with the large body of research led by **Stanford** researcher Carol Dweck.

Dweck's research says people can hold two types of beliefs about human achievement and development. Some hold onto a *fixed mindset*, which suggests that our skills and aptitudes are almost wholly innate. Others embrace a *growth mindset*, on the other hand, and believe that our ability to achieve is much more malleable.

In her research--and the findings of others after her, like Angela Duckworth--children who learn to embrace a *growth mindset* ultimately wind up achieving more, being happier, and being more successful than those who are taught to embrace a *fixed mindset*.

Every single time I've written about this subject, my inbox has been filled with comments from adults who realize ruefully that they were taught as children to embrace a fixed mindset. But this MIT experiment is about an optimistic hope that could counter that for future generations--the hope that parents can teach children differently, and do so from a very young age.

"There's some pressure on parents to make everything look easy and not get frustrated in front of their children," Laura Schulz, a professor of cognitive science at MIT, said in a press release. "There's nothing you can learn from a laboratory study that directly applies to parenting, but this does at least suggest that it may not be a bad thing to show your children that you are working hard to achieve your goals."

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