

# Learning how to try hard

**How many times a day do we tell the children in our classrooms to ‘concentrate!’, ‘try harder!’ How little effect it has! What do children know about the need to make an effort?**

We tend to treat children who don't concentrate or put much effort into things as being lazy, disinterested, distracted or just plain not very bright. And sometimes we're right. But the fact is that young children often simply don't understand what we mean when we ask for effort or concentration.

They may not even understand what level of performance we want – or how their effort falls short.

## Deliberate learning

School asks the child to learn things as an end in itself. And as Margaret Donaldson famously pointed out – this isn't natural! In everyday life we learn things as part of a meaningful activity – we don't set out to memorise the events of a trip to the zoo or how to bake a cake, we just remember them in context of the activity overall. We don't have to concentrate to commit to memory who won the prize we coveted ...

In everyday life learning is structured by goals that are personally relevant to the child, and is incidental to pursuing those goals. There's no need to 'try' or to 'concentrate' – learning is automatic. As a result, many young children arrive in school with no idea that it is necessary to make an effort to learn – and no idea how to go about it, when the activity involved does not fit with their own personal agenda.

## Learning to concentrate and try

Even adults can have problems learning certain types of thing – particularly when what is to be learned is novel (as much schoolwork is for many children).

Adults use all sorts of strategies to help our efforts along: making notes, re-structuring the material to be learned to simplify the task, looking for analogies, rehearsing and testing ourselves and so on.

Young children don't know about these strategies. Many are simply beyond their capacity. And even where a child is directly taught some simple ruse for making learning easier, he or she is likely not to notice that learning is more successful, and likely to drop that strategy as soon as it isn't enforced. The younger the child, the more likely he or she is to misjudge how easy

or difficult a task is going to be, and so to fail to realise that some sort of special strategy is required.

Insight into the need to make an effort comes far later than we suppose. I recall, for example, quite a bright child from a professional family rushing up to his mother after school one day in a state of high excitement: 'Mummy!' He said, 'You'll never guess what! The more work I do the better marks I get!'

Many a child has no insight whatever into the connection between their own efforts and the outcome. Typically, the penny drops at around nine.



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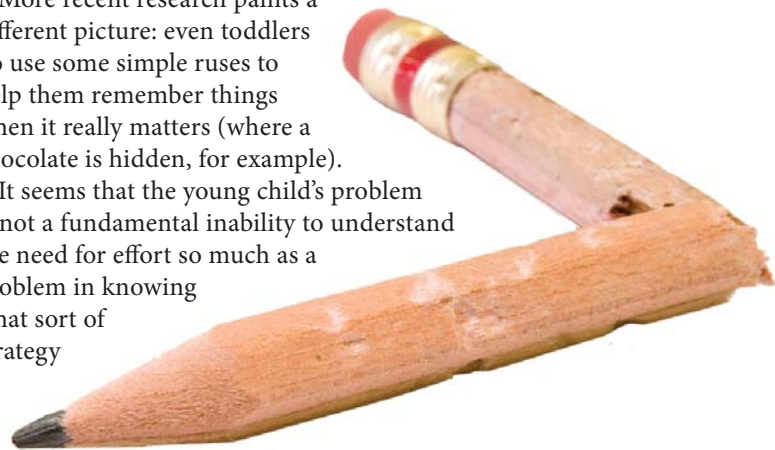
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## Can we teach study skills

Traditional research suggested that the very young had real difficulty both in using strategies to improve learning and in recognising the need for such strategies.

More recent research paints a different picture: even toddlers do use some simple ruses to help them remember things when it really matters (where a chocolate is hidden, for example).

It seems that the young child's problem is not a fundamental inability to understand the need for effort so much as a problem in knowing what sort of strategy



**‘The young child’s problem is not a fundamental inability to understand the need for effort so much as a problem in knowing what sort of strategy to use, and when, in making that effort’**

to use, and when, in making that effort. And that, to a greater extent than we used to think, can be taught.

**Teaching children how to try harder**

The key to teaching study skills for the five-to-sevens is to be very clear what exactly it is that you want the child to do. ‘Try harder’ is far too vague for this age group to comprehend, still less translate into action.

So be specific: make sure the child actually understands what level of achievement you want – what it is, exactly, that needs to be improved. If you want greater hand-control as a child colours something in, or more attention to the numbers involved in a sum, or closer focus on the overall

meaning of what is read (or whatever) – say so.

And have a specific suggestion for how the child might achieve what you want. If you don’t know what he or she could, specifically, do to improve, then the chances of the child figuring it out are miniscule.

Precise practical advice is needed, whether that relates to ways of increasing hand control or ways of checking on the meaning of sentences. Plus – make sure the child spots how this new approach lifts his or her game. **5to7**

**Key points**

- The younger the child, the less he or she understands the need for special effort to help learning along.
- Young children know few strategies for helping learning, and are poor at recognising when to use these strategies.
- The need for effort, and strategies for better learning can be taught in the classroom – to positive effect.



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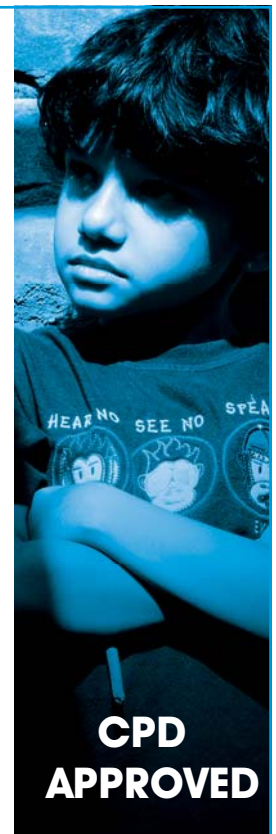
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