

# How Not to Raise a Quitter



*From guest contributor Dr. Michele Borba*

**Teach your children to hang in there when the going gets tough, but know when to let them throw in the towel.**

Perseverance often makes the critical distinction between whether kids succeed or fail. Will they have the inner strength to keep on or be plagued by self-defeat, be unwilling to give it their best shot? Children who learn to bounce back and not let setbacks get them down have gained a valuable skill for life. If our children are to succeed in this competitive world, they must learn to hang in there and not quit.

The good news? Research shows parents can build “stick-to-it-ness” by adopting simple, proven strategies.

## **Tips for Nurturing Stick-to-it-ness**

**1. Find the right activity that fascinates *your* kid**

Tune into your child and find his natural interests, passions or talents. If he loves drawing consider art lessons; if he enjoys listening to music, try piano or violin. Ask teachers or other adults for their input. The trick is to gauge your child's interest in the sport, lesson, or activity – before you start.

Remember, the sport that fit your oldest kid may not be the right fit for your middle kid. What turns your kid on? Find the right match and you'll ignite his passion!

## 2. Start with the right expectations

Parents who want their kids to stick with a task set the right expectations. Here are five factors to consider:

- **Kid factor.** Is what I'm expecting something my child is interested in or shows a talent for, or is it something I want more for myself? Who is pushing whom?
- **Time factor.** Does my child have enough time to devote to practicing? Don't overload! Beware, many tweens want to quit if there isn't enough time for friends. A University of Maryland study found that over the past 20 years the amount of time children ages nine to 12 spend participating in structured sports has increased by 35 percent.
- **Challenge factor.** Is my child developmentally ready for the tasks I'm expecting, or am I pushing him beyond his internal timetable? The best expectations are realistic but also gently stretch your child "one step more."
- **Teacher or coach factor.** Is the coach or teacher skilled and tuned in to kids? Benjamin Bloom's study of 120 immensely talented (and successful) individuals (in such fields as science, swimming, art and music) found that the first teacher was critical.

**Worth it factor.** Is this activity commitment worth the time, finances and energy for both my child and our family?

### **3. Be a good role model**

Show your kids how you don't give up on a task even when things get difficult. Before starting a new task, make sure your child overhears you say, "I'm going to persevere, until I am successful." Modeling the trait is always the No. 1 teaching method, so consciously tune up perseverance in your behavior.

Create a family motto when it comes to perseverance such as: "Winners never quit, quitters never win", "We finish what we start," or "The Smith's don't give up!" When you live by a family motto of commitment, your children will be more likely to use it when facing a challenge and less likely to quit.

### **4. Set a "No Quit Rule"**

In all fairness to your kid, be clear from the beginning about the level of commitment you expect. Make sure she knows what she's getting into, for how long (for the season, year) and understands that once she commits (to the team, instrument, project, class), there is no quitting barring exceptions like a broken bone or an abusive coach.

Many parents have their older kids sign a "Commitment Pledge," and then hang it on the refrigerator so she understands that throwing in the towel to those activities you've designated as "non-negotiables" are not an option

### **5. Instill a "Growth Mindset"**

Research shows that kids who persist and excel recognize that success comes from hard work and practice, not luck or money or genetics. In fact, if kids believe that performance is due to effort, they will be less likely to give up and will work harder when the going gets tough.

Use real examples – folks such as Jerry Rice, Pele, Vanessa and Serena Williams, Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong – who

reached the top because of hours and hours of practice.

Teach your kid the 10,000-Hour Rule: “Did you know that studies found that the best artists, musicians, swimmers and skaters practiced at least 10,000 hours, or ten years, to reach their success? Success is all a matter of how hard you work.”

## 6. Praise effort

Praising effort stretches perseverance; praising ability squelches

Carol Dweck's research from Columbia University finds that the kind of words we say can stretch or snap our children's perseverance. The key is to emphasize your child's effort and work and not the end product (like their grade, score or their abilities).

Praise when your child earns the recognition, but focus on their effort when he or she experiences success.

- **Instead of:** “What was your grade?” **Say:** “You're working so hard!”
- **Instead of:** “You're so smart!” **Say:** “You're improving because you're putting in so much effort.”
- **Instead of:** “How many goals did you get?” **Say:** “Keep at it! All that practice, is going to pay off!”

## If Your Child Wants to Quit

An estimated 83 percent of kids aged six to 17 are involved in some kind of extracurricular activity, so sooner or later most parents will be faced with a child wanting to quit something. And do know that little kids need to experiment with different activities so they can figure out what they like (so don't call that quitting.. reframe it as “You're trying...”) Here's how to decide:

### 1. Don't give in too quickly

While letting your kid quit may seem easier, beware. It may teach him it's OK to quit or take the easy way out. If you let your child quit too quickly, he'll never have the chance to experience success. (And weathering a bit of disappointment can actually help kids.) Here are some techniques to try depending on the child's age and situation.

- **Try to postpone quitting:** Encourage your kid to keep at it (at least a bit longer).
- **Negotiate:** "Stick with the cello until the end of the year, and you can be on soccer team this summer."
- **Put it on her shoulders:** "You go talk to the coach and ask what you can do to get more playing time." "Set up an appointment with the orchestra director and ask what why you didn't get first chair and what you can do to improve."
- **Refuse without guilt:** "Sorry, that was your commitment, you're stuck with it."

## 2. Hear your kid out

If your child's "quitting behavior" is brand new or is escalating, then ask your child what's really going on. Try to understand his quitting motive: "You were really jazzed when you signed up. What changed?" "What do you need to make it work?" "Would you like to continue, but with a different teacher or team?"

## 3. Look for a solution

Might there be a simple way to get him over the slump? Talk to the teacher or coach to get their take. Watch from the sidelines to see if your kid's complaints of unfair treatment are legit. Your goal is to figure out what's really going on, and whether there is something you can do to help your child hang in there and get over the slump. Here are four common problems, and solutions:

- **Task or placement too advanced is too difficult; too**

much pressure to perform. Solution: Take your expectations down a notch; switch the class or team to one that is not quite as accelerated.

- **Overscheduled.** no down time or time to relax or be with friends. Solution: Free up time, drop one thing in that schedule. The top reason tweens want to quit is because the practice is taking up time away from friends. If that's the issue, find ways to schedule in "friend time" and even have your tween practice with the other kids.
- **Environment or teacher isn't supportive; too harsh or punitive.** Solution: Change the teacher or mentor; switch the team if needed. Research on talented kids (who remained talented) found that the early teacher was essential. She was usually the "Aunt Bee" type – warm, patient and ignited in the child "You can do it!" Find that teacher!
- **Hasn't experienced success yet, but it's only been a short while.** Solution: Get some help. Get a tutor to help him with the math class. Hire a high school student to throw him extra pitches. The key to success is practice, practice, practice...but that also means your child needs to be doing the "right kind of purposeful practice" so he sees improvement.

## How to Decide Whether to Quit

You'll need to weigh which lesson is more important: Helping your child learn to stick it out, or the realization that some activities just aren't the right match. And you'll need to decide on a case-by-case situation. Here are five factors to help you decide:

- **Stress.** Is it stressful enough to cause concerning behavioral changes in your child?
- **Joylessness.** Is it mostly cheerless for the child? Has he stuck with the task for the required amount of time and just lost interest? Then it's time to move on.
- **Beyond abilities.** Despite his efforts, the activity is

too difficult for his current abilities.

- **Poor coach or mentor.** Not a good match for your child, yells too much, far too competitive, turns your kid off to the task, pushes “win at any cost,” unfair, not knowledgeable or offers poor advice, overall more harmful than helpful.
- **Gave it his best shot.** Your child tried his hardest but things aren’t improving.

Then it’s time to MOVE ON! Don’t dwell, just move on! And let that be a lesson for your child as well, “Some things just aren’t the right match.”

### Worry If There’s a Quitting Pattern

Every kid wants to give up now and then. Especially from ages 3 to 6, it may not mean much. Be concerned when bailing out becomes a pattern with your older kid. Watch for these signs which could mean something else is going on and you should dig deeper:

- Unwilling to try a task or stick with it, fearing failure or making a mistake
- Easily discouraged, upset or quick to anger when facing setbacks
- Needs encouragement or the promise of a reward to complete a task
- Relies on someone else to complete a task
- Defensive or blames errors on others
- Cheats, cuts corners, or makes excuses to not do the task
- Gives up as the easy way out instead of really confronting the problem

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