

How to Teach Kids Perseverance and Goal-Setting

To encourage perseverance, teach preteens how to set goals and work to meet them.

7 Goal-Setting Strategies

In early elementary school, Zach Shugart tried every sport but nothing clicked. "He just didn't want to practice to really develop his skills," says his mom, Candy, of Colorado Springs. It was a similar story with schoolwork. "He had the potential to be a great student but wasn't willing to focus on his studies," Shugart recalls.

All parents share that sense of frustration when their child doesn't try hard enough to accomplish something they know he's perfectly capable of. What can you do? One way to foster a can-do attitude is to help your child learn to set goals and meet them, one small step at a time.

Don't get too excited: You probably won't be able to get your child to start aiming for straight A's right away. That kind of goal would be a major challenge for most preteens. But experts say this is an ideal time to introduce your child to the concept of establishing targets and working toward them.

Try these strategies to teach your child the power of goal-setting so he'll eventually learn how to work to achieve his best.

Get the Idea Across

Start the process by looking for ways that your child already uses goal-setting techniques. If you notice that your son has managed to save up his money to buy a video game, for example, discuss the steps he needed to take to get what he wanted. Talk to him about how good it feels to accomplish something that you've worked toward. Then, discuss how these same techniques can be used to meet other challenges.

Start Small

Help your child think of a fun goal she could achieve within a short time. Maybe she could finish a book she started or complete a craft project. "Little goals are the best way to get kids moving toward big goals," says Jim Wiltens, a leadership-training instructor in the San Francisco-area schools. "Meeting a goal gives kids an incredible surge of energy."

Let Them Choose

As much as you might want your child to make the honor roll, it's best to let your kid decide what she wants to achieve. Then you can help her make a plan. Obviously, some goals require more input from you. If learning to

figure skate is your kid's dream, you're going to have to help her set and achieve her targets. "If parents find they're nagging or getting angry that their child isn't working hard enough to meet a goal, that's a signal they need to back off," warns Edward L. Coyle, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Be Alert to Possibilities

If your child says, "I wish I could win a prize in the science fair this year," use it as an opportunity to assist him in creating a plan. "Help him write down specific action steps and a timetable for accomplishing each of them," says John Bishop, author of *Goal Setting for Students*. Then check in with him from time to time to help keep him focused on his targets.

Show Them How

"Adults have a much greater sense of what it takes to accomplish goals," says Virginia Shiller, PhD, author of *Rewards for Kids! Ready-to-Use Charts & Activities for Positive Parenting*. So include your child in your own goal-setting to show her how the process works. Say you want to create a garden. Get your child involved in everything from researching plants to turning the dirt. "Adults know how to break a goal down into steps, and that's something kids need to learn," Dr. Shiller says.

Provide a Reality Check

Children often underestimate how hard it can be to meet a goal, and then they get frustrated and discouraged when they fall short. If your child decides he wants to play the guitar, for instance, be encouraging but realistic. Point out the challenges and the dedication it will require. The idea isn't to make the goal seem too daunting, but rather to share in the seriousness of the undertaking by helping plan it out.

Applaud Effort

As your child begins to set goals and work toward them, don't forget the compliments. Say something like, "I'm really impressed. When you care about something you really go after it!" advises Dr. Shiller. That's what Candy Shugart did when, in fourth grade, Zach set a goal of learning to play the clarinet and worked hard to master the instrument.

"I never said, 'Go practice,'" Shugart says. "Zach did it himself. I just gave him lots of acknowledgment." After that success he set increasingly more ambitious goals. And his discipline carried over to schoolwork too. "Zach, who's 12 now, says things like, 'I can't cram for this test. I have to start earlier,'" his mom notes. "The change is phenomenal."

When Kids Fall Short

So your child wanted to improve in math, but he got another C on the latest test. Now what? Try these steps.

- Review the goal with your child. Maybe it was too vague or too ambitious.
- Ask your child for suggestions. Children are more likely to follow through on their own ideas about what else they can do.
- Help envision the benefits. Ask: "What do you think it will feel like to do better on the next test?"
- Share your childhood frustrations. Your child might feel better when you tell him about your difficulties learning fractions.
- Compliment him. Even if your child doesn't get the A he hoped for, make sure to praise him for trying ("I'm so proud of how hard you studied!").
- Don't use threats or bribes. Offering a video game in exchange for an A, or a punishment for a D, won't help your child's follow-through in the long run.

Just Do It! A Five-Step Plan

Jim Wiltens, author of *Goal Express*, outlines steps to set -- and meet -- any target.

1. **Write it down.** Become a better baseball player, for example.
2. **Make it specific.** "I want to be able to get a base hit once each game."
3. **Consider Pros and Cons.***Pros:* It will be much more fun and much less embarrassing to be on the team.*Cons:* I already have practice twice a week. Extra practice will cut into my free time.
4. **Define small steps by asking the Three W's.**

5. "Who can help?" A coach, parent, or friend, for example.
6. "What do I need to do?" Practice more, go to batting cage.
7. "When?" 30 minutes twice a week.
8. **Monitor Progress.** Have my parents videotape my swing. Get feedback from my coach.