

How to Motivate Kids to Practice Hard Things

Recent research can help us teach kids to practice the right way to reach their goals.

About the Author

According to a recent [survey](#) by the Society of Human Resource Management, 97 percent of employers say that *reliability* is a very or extremely important qualification for an entry-level job; it's at the top of nearly everyone's list. How do parents help their kids learn to be reliable—people whom others can trust to consistently do their best work?



One place to start is to teach kids the importance of practice. Kids practice to reach all kinds of goals—writing their names, dribbling a basketball, playing a song on the guitar. But

they aren't always motivated to practice, and they don't always practice in the right way.

A highly effective and well-researched technique called

[deliberate practice](#) allows you to repeatedly work on a mental or physical skill with the aim of getting better in the future. Research suggests that children as young as five can start to understand deliberate practice, and children and adolescents who engage in it make gains in [school achievement](#) and [motor skills](#).

By encouraging them to engage in deliberate practice as they get older, we can help our kids achieve their goals.

What is deliberate practice?

According to researcher [Lauren Eskreis-Winkler and her colleagues](#), shallow practice is how most people study—they practice what they already know while they are only partly focused, which is not particularly effective. In contrast, they explain, deliberate practice has four principles:

1. **Working on weaknesses:** Rather than doing things that you already do well, deliberate practice focuses on the things that are hard for you. For example, you might replay the part of your trumpet solo with the hard high notes that you've been having trouble with, rather than the parts that you know well.
2. **Full concentration:** Deliberate practice is difficult when you face distractions that make it hard to stay on task, like noise, social media, or people nearby. Instead

of writing an essay with your phone beside you while hanging out with your friends, you might go to a quiet library and tuck your phone in your backpack.

3. **Feedback:** Deliberate practice involves finding out what you got right and where you made mistakes by asking a teacher or coach or checking your work. For example, if you made mistakes on your long-division homework, you might review your work again and talk to your teacher about how you can solve those problems correctly in the future.
4. **Repetition until mastery:** Deliberate practice requires you to keep working on your weaknesses, stay on task, and get feedback until you master your specific goal.

How to motivate kids toward deliberate practice

How do you motivate kids to engage in deliberate practice, which tends to be more demanding than shallow practice?

In multiple experiments, Eskreis-Winkler and her colleagues [studied](#) American middle schoolers between fifth and seventh grade, as well as college undergraduates. They randomly assigned adolescents from multiple schools to two groups: One group learned typical study skills, and the other group learned the difference between shallow practice and deliberate practice using animated videos, prompts for reflection, and short writing activities.

In some of the videos, people shared their experiences with how hard deliberate practice is and some tips on how to handle the challenge:

1. **Expect and be OK with failure:** Famous people talked about how failure is a normal part of learning. They described having failed many times before they became successful and framed mistakes as a necessary part of deliberate practice that led them to their achievements.
2. **Tolerate feeling frustrated and confused:** A student told his life story, from growing up poor and having trouble learning in elementary school to graduating from MIT. He shared that you make a lot of mistakes as you work on your weaknesses, which can be frustrating and confusing, but it means you're in the "stretch zone." Rather than thinking it's a bad sign and time to give up, this is actually the time to keep going. People can learn to tolerate their frustration more and more with practice.
3. **Question your beliefs about talent:** An actor, an athlete, and a musician talked about how practice led them to be successful in their different life goals—and none of them mentioned talent. People mistakenly think that talent is the most important factor because they don't see all the hours of practice that go into people's final performances—like an actor taking days to

memorize lines, a swimmer waking up at dawn for months to practice the butterfly stroke, or a novelist writing for years to complete a manuscript.

To solidify this lesson, the researchers showed adolescents anonymous quotes from other students that described their practice habits and preferences. For example, one quote said, "I thought the kids who were good at fractions were just smarter than me. But in the past couple of months, I realized that by doing deep practice, I could get just as many fraction problems right as they could. When I work hard and do deep practice on my fractions homework, I come to class being able to answer just as many problems as the other kids."

Finally, the researchers asked the adolescents to write a short letter to other students who didn't know about deliberate practice to communicate the significance of what they had learned. (The researchers explain that "one of the most effective ways to persuade a participant of a message is to have the participant advocate the message to others." [Research](#) shows that this "saying-is-believing" effect influences their later memory and impression of the topic.)

The researchers [found](#) that these brief lessons motivated adolescents to engage in deliberate practice on math problems and improved their achievement in math, course grades, and GPA after one academic quarter.

If you want your kids to tap into these benefits, tell and show them how much you practice to work on goals, how you experience failure on an everyday basis, and how you tolerate frustration and confusion. Remind your kids about how their favorite soccer players or swimmers work with their coaches to get feedback. Encourage your children to talk to their siblings, cousins, or friends about how they use deliberate practice to prepare for their tap dance performance so that they can reap the benefits of the “saying-is-believing” effect.

“When I work hard and do deep practice on my fractions homework, I come to class being able to answer just as many problems as the other kids.”

—A student in the study

Besides helping kids cope with how hard deliberate practice feels in the present, another way to motivate them is to encourage good feelings about their desired future—according to a [study](#) on how deliberate practice develops in children.

Melissa Brinums and her colleagues studied 120 Australian four to seven year olds. First, the researchers showed the children three games that they could play: golf, ring toss, or cup-and-ball. Then, they were told that they would later be tested on a target game (say, golf) and could win one

sticker each time they scored.

The researchers randomly assigned the children to two groups. Before leaving the room for a few minutes, they told one group, "If you like, you can use this time to prepare for the test." They told the other group, "If you like, you can use this time to play with any of the games." When they returned, they asked the children which game they played the most, why, and what they could do to get better at the games.

The researchers measured how much deliberate practice children engaged in based on which game they chose to play first and how long they played the target game. They also used the children's replies to their questions to gauge their understanding of practice. The kids earned a higher score if they talked about practicing, improving, or being persistent than if they talked about fun or luck or couldn't answer the questions.

The results? Six and seven year olds both understood deliberate practice and engaged in it without being cued. Five year olds showed some understanding and sometimes deliberately practiced. Four year olds did not understand deliberate practice yet.

"These increases in understanding of and engagement in deliberate practice may be due to age-related

improvements in cognitive capacities,” explain Brinums and her colleagues. Episodic foresight—the capacity to imagine the future and act accordingly—begins to develop in the preschool years and improves throughout childhood.

Episodic foresight allows us to [predict how the future might make us feel](#). Compared to the younger children, the older children were likely more motivated to practice because they were better able to envision being tested and feeling happy about earning stickers for scoring in the game.

Although preschoolers may not be able to forecast the future yet, parents can encourage their school-age kids—who aren’t eager to practice piano, for example—to imagine how being well-prepared will make them [feel](#) during an upcoming recital.

Ultimately, parents can support kids as they learn to value practice, whether it’s in school, at their first summer job, or within their family and community. Deliberate practice may not guarantee them a gold medal at the Olympics, but it can [improve](#) their performance so they do their personal best. And that will help them grow up to be someone others can depend on.