



INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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Raising a persistent Child

by Joseph Degeling, Psychologist

WD-40, the can of spray-on oil/lubricant, is a fairly well known household product. As the website for this product proudly boasts – it has 2000+ uses! I'm sure many of you know the story of how this product was named, but, for those that don't, the name literally stands for *Water Displacement, 40th attempt*. Persistence paid off for Norm Larson in 1953, when, during his 40th attempt to create a product to prevent metals from rusting, he developed WD-40. In other words, after 39 failures, he finally got it right. Did he at any stage want to throw in the towel? Was there someone in the background supporting and encouraging him? I can only imagine there would have been an abundance of frustration, anxiety, stress, discouragement and anger. How long would I have lasted?

We increasingly live in a world of instant gratification – our technological and convenience driven world seemingly sterilises us from the effort that would have traditionally been exercised in our everyday tasks of living. Many aspects of our lives that used to be complicated and difficult have been simplified, made quicker, outsourced. While this is fantastic in so many ways I do believe that there are some potential costs. Do

you remember life before mobile telephones? I often wonder to myself how I remembered all those phone numbers – friends, family, home, work, Windscreens O'Brien – the list was quite long. If I lost my phone today, I really wouldn't remember any phone numbers other than my mum's and my wife's! So, the trouble here is that I don't have to exercise my persistence with the task of remembering phone numbers, as my phone will do it for me. How many other areas of our lives similarly require minimal effort? Of course it's not all doom and gloom for persistence – the Norm Larson's of tomorrow will still persist in achieving great things, they will just do it in a more technologically reliant way.

However, it does remain that our ability to persist in the face of failure and frustration is a characteristic which will have a marked influence on our lives. In fact, the ability to delay gratification, manage emotions and persist in a task is one of the biggest determinants of later achievement – it is even better at predicting achievement than intelligence. Despite that fact that psychological theory and research considers persistence to be a biological,

temperamental trait, there is abundant evidence to also suggest that it is a characteristic that can be developed and nurtured, particularly by parents and teachers, and especially in a world of proliferating instant gratification.

How do we help our kids develop persistence?

1. *Model persistence* – show your children what it means to stick to something until it is complete. This may mean that you simply verbalise the processes you go through to achieve tasks around the home. For example, instead of just making dinner, you might speak aloud to yourself saying "I need to start planning for dinner – hmm I wonder what we will have. Now I need all my ingredients..." and so on;
2. *Model how to be flexible in your persistence* – demonstrate what to do when you get stuck – that is, through problem solving and creative thinking they can come

up with different solutions, particularly when they are not succeeding with a specific strategy or technique;

3. *Help them to articulate a vision or goal for themselves* – help them explore goals that are realistic. While it is good to focus on the long term outcome, this can sometimes be so distant it saps their motivation – teach them to focus on a step-by-step process to get there – “what do I have to do today to achieve my goal?”;
4. *Reward the effort they make, rather than the result they achieve* – when they get exam results back, focus your comments on the effort that they put into it – even if they don’t do so well. For example “you tried really hard didn’t you – you put in such a lot of effort every day, and you were rewarded with such great marks”;
5. *Encourage your kids to take risks in their learning, both at school and at home* – if your child constantly asks you questions while doing homework, instead of giving them the answer, encourage them to take a

learning risk by answering the question themselves – when it comes time to review the work, offer praise for taking a risk, and reward their correct attempts. If they get it wrong they will probably feel frustrated and disappointed, but say to them (this is the key bit) something like “wow – look what you have just learnt – good work!” In this way we are explicitly teaching them that failure can be their ally. Surely we learn more from failure than we do from success;

6. *Show that you believe in them, even when they are “failing” or making mistakes* – It is so easy to get angry and frustrated at our kids when they just don’t seem to “get” something that we have been showing them for the past 10 minutes. How easy is it to say something like “why can’t you just understand this? We’ve been over it a hundred times!” The unintended implication is that the child is dumb, or at least that’s how these statements are likely to be interpreted by them. Having a strong belief in themselves and their academic ability is a key component of a young

person’s motivation to persist. It is so important we manage these feelings of frustration and demonstrate that we still see them as smart, valuable and capable, even if they get it wrong. Over the course of their childhood, these positive parental statements and behaviours are internalised as positive self-esteem and beliefs around their abilities;

7. *Help your kids develop the ability to tolerate failure and frustration* – we can do this by managing our own emotions, as well as modelling and teaching relaxation and coping skills;
8. *Schedule regular technology free time* – have some family rules around technology – that is, no technology during the week, or in the holidays you may have 2 days a week where there is no technology allowed (including you parents!).

RECOMMENDED READING

- *How children succeed: grit, curiosity and the hidden power of character*, (2013), By Paul Tough;
- *The optimistic child*, (2007), by Martin Seligman.



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