



# Mastery Motivation

## Persistence and Problem Solving in Preschool

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Mastery motivation is persistence—continuing to do or to try to do something that is difficult—at mastering challenging tasks or activities.

Problem solving is natural for preschoolers. As teachers know, everyday routines can bring difficult challenges, like learning how to zip up a coat or ask for help before frustration sets in. Each challenge builds children’s skills in different areas of development: language, social and emotional, cognitive, and physical. But sometimes a problem can seem too challenging.

You may have seen this scenario play out in your classroom: Two preschoolers are trying to solve the same puzzle. Both make a mistake, but while one child gives up, the other child keeps trying different ways to solve the puzzle. Early childhood researchers call this persistence at mastering challenging tasks *mastery motivation*, and it plays a key role in children’s learning and in their later academic achievement. Early childhood teachers are in a great position to help children foster this important skill.

Here are five ways to support mastery motivation:

- 1 Provide lots of different types of challenging activities, like math games that have more than one way to solve a problem.
- 2 Support children’s independence and let them make their own choices in activities or during play.
- 3 Try to resist the urge to fix the problem—it can take away children’s sense that they are capable problem solvers.

4 Do provide gentle guidance when frustration starts to set in, such as holding the puzzle board steady while a child adds a puzzle piece or offering a well-timed, “What if you turned that piece the other way?”

5 Give children positive feedback by praising the problem-solving process and encouraging them to keep trying.

We know that children who are *not* provided with challenging activities or who receive negative or harsh feedback tend to show less mastery motivation. The same holds true for children receiving praise like “You’re so smart” and children whose environment is overly controlling.

When teachers appreciate children’s efforts, children learn that working hard and persisting are positive behaviors. As children grow, they will face more and more difficult problems. They need to know that it’s okay to struggle—it’s part of the learning process.

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