

Helping kids through challenges and struggles

We live in an age and culture that emphasizes comfort, convenience and expediency. Yet, our faith is full of admonitions to “wait upon the Lord” and persevere in the face of struggle. Many saints in our Church’s history showed their “extraordinary virtue” by persisting in the midst of great challenge. How can we instill the virtues of determination and patience in our children? Here are a few pointers from research in child development and mental health:

1. Exercise their “waiting muscle.”

In his book, “The Happiest Toddler on the Block,” Dr. Harvey Karp suggests we teach children to wait for something good by letting them know we have heard their request and plan to fulfill it, but then having them wait a while. Too often, we reward whining instead of waiting when it appears that we don’t give our children what they want until they ask enough times. You can reward waiting by giving extra praise or tangible rewards when kids have done exceptionally well at being patient – for example, waiting quietly or for longer durations.

2. Make sure kids have opportunities for pretend play.

New research in child development shows that while self-regulation is the variable most correlated with later success, the development of self-regulation is declining in children due to their overscheduled lives and because of the trend toward academic preschools, which, because they generally involve much direction from adults, hamper children’s capacity to learn to direct themselves. In pretend play, children use a great deal of “private speech,” a form of narration that forms the foundation for the thoughts that keep us going when things

get tough.

3. Build your child's repertoire of coping skills.

Coping skills are the things we do that help us manage stress. Emotion-focused coping skills, such as deep breathing, relaxation and thinking positive thoughts, help us deal with stresses we can't control. Problem-focused coping skills help us work on the things we can change. One simple problem-solving method for children is the 1-2-3 check method: 1) Ask yourself, "What is the problem?" 2) Think about all of your choices. 3) Take the best action. And, then, Check: How did it work?

4. Give help in the form of encouraging words.

Sometimes, when we see our children struggling, we are tempted to step in and do the work for them. If we help them too much with something they can do, they may get the message that they can't do it without us. Instead, give help in the form of "you can do it" messages. Talk about other successes they have had, and talents or qualities they can draw from to get through tough situations. Have them close their eyes and visualize successfully completing the task or making it through the struggle. This is a secret of many great athletes: If we can picture ourselves doing something, we are more likely to do it.

5. Encourage them to draw from God's strength.

St. Paul says, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13, RSV). Encourage children with stories of heroes of the faith who have conquered great obstacles to become all God made them to be.