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How to respond when kids say “I can’t do it”



By Amanda Morin





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All kids have things they do well and things that are hard for them. And most kids have moments when they say, "I can't do it!" or "That's too hard!" What can you say when you hear these kinds of comments? Here are three ideas.

Learning and thinking differences...

Can be managed

Are untreatable

1. "I know this is hard for you."

Don't shy away from tough conversations. Your first instinct may be to jump in with something like "That's not true. I know you can do it!" But when kids tell you they can't do something, they're opening up.

Tell them you hear them. It shows you’re listening and willing to let them lead the conversation. You may know about their struggles. But let kids tell you how they feel, and how their challenges affect daily life.

2. “Have I ever told you about...”

Tying things into stories about friends and family can help break the ice. It lets you talk in a good-natured way about how everybody struggles with something.

Maybe you’re famous for getting lost, but you never talked about it in terms of your trouble reading maps. Or maybe Grandpa’s socks never match, but not everybody knows it’s because Grandpa is color-blind. Adding context to those stories is a good way to start conversations about why people find some things hard to do.

3. “You can’t do this yet.”

Adding the word “yet” lets you talk about what can happen. It gives you a way to introduce the idea of a growth mindset – the belief that abilities can improve over time. It also tells kids you don’t expect less of them because they’re struggling with something.

But you need to back up those expectations with support. For example, show [**how to break down big projects**](#) into a more manageable plan. Or try [**growth mindset activities**](#) to help them learn from mistakes and go from “I can’t” to “I can.”

More ways to help

Keep in mind that kids don't always see the big picture. They might not notice **what they're doing well**. Kids who learn and think differently can get discouraged easily, too. That's because they might struggle with things more often than other kids their age. On top of "I can't do it," they might say things like **"I'm dumb."**

When kids are hard on themselves, it's natural to focus on what needs improving. But don't forget to recognize strengths, too. Here's an activity you can work on together:



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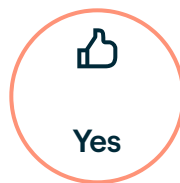
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