

# Pushing Kids Without Pushing Too Hard

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We all want what's best for our children. But our idea of what is best for them might not always jibe with theirs. Often parents will give a nudge towards the decision they think is correct, trying to find that delicate balance between encouraging and pushing too hard.

But what is pushing too hard? At its best, getting kids to do things that are challenging for them will teach them grit and flexibility while also widening their world view — whether it's participating in sports, trying out for a play or engaging in a new social situation. But at its worst, pushing children too far can cause them to retreat inward, become resentful or develop even greater anxiety about trying new things. It can be difficult to determine how much parental pressure on children is healthy and when you should back off.

## Why we push

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“I think that pushing our kids is a matter of getting them out of their comfort zone, and then pushing the zone to be further and further out,” says Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and the founding president of the Child Mind Institute. “We know that being able to tolerate discomfort is a wonderful life trait, and in addition to that, it makes them grittier and more resilient.”

What we push kids to do depends on our judgment of what's in their best interest, Dr. Koplewicz notes. “That could include pushing them while they're in school to study harder, to do better academically. And we push them to try new things that we think will enrich their lives and make them feel good.” We might also push children to do things in the hopes that it will give them a competitive advantage on future college applications and scholarships.

Dr. Janine Domingues, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, adds that encouraging kids to power through a tough situation can bolster their confidence.

“I think it gives them a sense of confidence to know that if there is a challenging moment, as a parent you're helping them to problem solve it through as opposed to completely removing it or taking the problem away,” Dr. Domingues explains. “A child really does feel accomplished and good about the fact that they were able to get through it.”

## Know your child

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The most important factor in knowing when and how much to push is thinking about your child's personality. “The first step is knowing your kiddo,” says Dr. Domingues. Particularly when it comes to pushing them to do extracurricular activities, consider your child's strengths

and interests, and have them be part of the conversation about what might be fun to do outside of school.

Perhaps you think they play too many video games and want them to be more socially engaged or physically active. “But if they’re not into sports, then pushing them into team sports may not be the best thing,” advises Dr. Domingues. Other activities — like a coding club or cooking class — may be more appealing while still hitting some of the marks you are looking for in an activity.

If you are meeting resistance, then it might be time to examine your own motivations for pushing your kid in a certain direction, says Dr. Koplewicz. “Are we encouraging or pushing our kids because it’s in their best interest, or is it something we’re doing for ourselves?”

Often our own childhood experiences greatly impact how we parent. “I think most parents want their kids to avoid the mistakes they made,” Dr. Koplewicz reflects. So if a parent thinks they would have been more successful if only they’d done better in school or participated in a sports, chances are they will push their kids in that direction.

Alternately, if parents have great memories of something from their youth they may try to push their kids to do the same thing, whether it’s join the track team or write for the school newspaper. But as Dr. Domingues warns, “I always tell parents the things that motivate us might not necessarily motivate them.”

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## When kids push back

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When kids don’t respond to gentle pressure, it’s important to consider what might be standing in their way. Is there some reason why your child isn’t engaging academically or socially? Is something inhibiting your kid’s ability to adapt or try new things?

“Sometimes when pushing kids you bump into a real limitation. It can be an anxiety disorder, or a learning disability,” explains Dr. Koplewicz. “There’s a real barrier there. It’s not that they don’t want to do it. They would love to do it. It’s just too hard and unless you remove the barrier, encouraging and cheerleading won’t work.”

For example, if your child is perfectly happy on the basketball court or going to school dances but won’t participate in the classroom, Dr. Koplewicz says the issue probably isn’t social anxiety. Instead they may be having trouble reading or processing information, so it may be worth a closer look.

Sometimes our expectations can become outsized, too. Parents who are very motivated by the idea of getting their children into college might already be thinking of signing up for the right extracurriculars and getting the right GPA when their children are still several years

away from filling out an application. Being pushed for a goal so far in the future, and hearing about it for so much of their lives, can make kids feel inadequate and resentful. If you think that your child might be feeling too pressured, it is important to take a step back.

Children who are feeling overwhelmed or burned out might benefit from an approach that focuses more on the present. Praise successes and new skills for their own sake. If your daughter is playing soccer and taking piano, perhaps it will help her later in life, but she shouldn't think that is the only motivation. If your son is struggling in math and needs a tutor, get one by all means, but explain that your goal is to help him understand what he is being taught — not to get him into Harvard.

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## Sticking with it

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When trying new things, Drs. Koplewicz and Domingues agree it's especially important that kids are encouraged to see them through. So if they sign up for eight tap dancing lessons, they know they have to finish the eight, even if they decide after one that karate would have been more fun.

“You are also trying to teach your child that if you make a commitment it's good to stick to your commitment,” says Dr. Domingues. “Just because something happened that you didn't like on the first day, or whatever the case is, doesn't mean that it's going to be completely ruined for the rest of the time. So you're also teaching them to be flexible with their thinking of how it's going.”

That said, if a child who was enjoying an activity suddenly hates it, it could be a sign that something troubling happened. They may be experiencing [bullying](#), have had an [embarrassing social mishap](#), or may not feel supported by the teacher or coach. “You want to take the time to hear them out,” says Dr. Domingues, “and explore the options with them.”

Of course, Dr. Koplewicz points out, parents can misread a situation. “Sometimes you make a mistake and have to regroup. You can't beat yourself up afterwards.” He recalls sending his son to sleepaway camp when he was seven years old and making him finish the seven weeks even though his son was unhappy. When the boy came home, he said he really wished they hadn't made him stay, and Dr. Koplewicz realized he hadn't been ready for camp. So they took the next summer off, and the following summer eased back in with a short program that he ended up loving. It all worked out in the end.

## How to help

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Pushing your child to do something doesn't mean throwing them into the deep end of a pool and hoping they swim. There are ways parents preview, scaffold and support to help ensure that their kids are successful in their endeavors.

If a child is apprehensive about joining a sports team, for example, Dr. Domingues suggests easing them in. So before it begins they can meet the coach, visit the place where practices will take place, talk to someone who is already on the team, and read a book or watch a movie about a sports team. "There's some legwork to be done upfront to make it doable and approachable," says Dr. Domingues, "but you're still pushing them or having the expectation that they can get through it even if they're anxious about it."

For many kids having a time limit may help — so saying we'll try this activity for four sessions and then we can reevaluate and see what you like and don't like about it.

A lot of it goes back to knowing your kid. If they aren't ready for a big commitment, try starting off small. Rather than a camp that lasts all summer, maybe start with one that is a week long, for example. This way, Dr. Domingues explains that "they get a taste of doing something and they're also potentially gaining the experience of feeling accomplished with it. A positive experience with it can then lend itself to being committed to something for a longer period of time."

Often, a rewards system can be effective for helping to motivate your child. Dr. Domingues explains, "For starters, we want them to be motivated to do it. But especially if they're dealing with something like anxiety or depression — something that makes it really challenging — then you want to set up outside extrinsic motivation first until they feel the success of it and it becomes intrinsically motivating for them." She suggests figuring out what excites your child and setting up a reward menu based on their interests. You can set up small, weekly rewards and a larger one that they have to work towards. It can be anything from screen time to a trip somewhere fun.

And for kids who are struggling with academic pressure — maybe they've already been diagnosed with a learning disability and are feeling worn out from going to tutoring and learning specialist appointments — make sure they are getting opportunities to feel good about their achievements. Goals should be small enough to be attainable and build up their confidence. Remember also that for children who are struggling, it is even more important for them to find an outlet for their emotions and to help boost their self-esteem.

Modeling grit and resilience can be effective as well. "Parents can say, this is hard but we can do this," notes Dr. Koplewicz. "I'm doing it. I'm reading a book that's hard. Mom is doing exercises that are hard. You can do this."

## What is pushing too hard?

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Of course, there is such a thing as pushing your child too hard. “If a kid becomes too distressed or shows dysfunction, you’ve gone too far,” says Dr. Koplewicz. Maybe it’s age-related. Maybe he’s not in the right developmental stage.

For instance, if a child who’s afraid of clowns wants to avoid going to a birthday party, you might push him to go, since we know that yielding to fears reinforces them. “But if he can’t tolerate the clown no matter what you do, and he’s crying the whole time he’s at the party, then you have to declare success very quickly. You have to say okay, you did it for two minutes. I’m really proud of you. Next time it will be a little bit longer, but clearly it’s too painful.”

“I think there are definitely times when maybe you’re pushing too hard,” agrees Dr. Domingues. “If you really do see a complete mood change, if they’re more irritable more days than not, if there’s extreme tantrums about just going, or if the fighting to get them there is excessive or outweighs all the other things, then it might be time to reassess.”

Read more:

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### Parenting Challenges

Katherine Martinelli is a journalist who has published internationally on a variety of topics including parenting, food, travel and education. She is also mom to an inquisitive toddler.