

# Struggle can be a *good thing*

*As a Learning Coach, it's important to recognize that allowing your student to struggle can be a very good thing. There are two types of struggle when it comes to learning: productive and destructive.*

## Growing the Brain

We've all heard it, those frustrated cries of, "I can't do it! It's too hard!" It can be difficult to know when to step in and when to let your student struggle a while longer. Recent studies on brain development and what happens when we struggle show that the brain actually grows when it is challenged!

In Dr. Jo Boaler's book, *Mathematical Mindsets* (2016), Boaler explains that when we make mistakes, our brains 'fire,' or create additional synapses that improve memory. This activity happens more often if a person has a growth mindset and sees mistakes as opportunities to learn. When our brains struggle and make mistakes, our brains grow!

## Productive Struggle

In an ideal learning situation that leads to a productive struggle:

- The student has mastered prior concepts that are needed to complete the task or solve the current problem.
- The new concept is just beyond what he or she has already learned.
- The student applies what he or she knows to learn the new concept.
- The student works through the challenge.

### Productive Struggle is:

- Motivating.
- Results in understanding.
- Contributes to a sense of accomplishment.

## Destructive Struggle

Some struggles can be destructive. If your student appears to be struggling, encourage him or her to try a little bit longer, but look for signs that indicate your student might be struggling too much if:

- He or she becomes overly frustrated or gives up.
- He or she doesn't know the foundational concepts needed to complete the current challenge.

Ask probing questions to determine understanding of the prior concepts. If your student has prior knowledge of the concepts:

- Have him or her review them.
- Check to see if there a step missing that will solve the problem.

### Destructive Struggle is:

- Demotivating.
- Causes frustration.
- Contributes to failure.

*continued*

## STRUGGLE CAN BE A GOOD THING

Students should not be left to struggle to the point where they become overly frustrated or don't have the knowledge needed to move forward.

### How Can You Help?

You know your student better than anyone. If you anticipate that he or she is going to have difficulty with a task, help avoid or minimize frustration by:

- Talking over the problem.
- Suggesting helpful strategies to approach the solution.
- Providing emotional support.
- Encouraging review of prior concepts before starting the current task.
- Talking to your student about how mistakes and struggles lead to brain growth.

Above all, avoid solving the problem for your student, no matter how much you want to help. If, in the past, you have stepped in and solved the problem yourself, there might be a transition period where your student will need to adjust to struggling on his or her own. Don't rob your student of this opportunity to learn.

When students are challenged by a task and have the knowledge needed to take understanding to the next level, struggle becomes very beneficial. The student is able to transfer his or her knowledge to the new task and progress to a deeper understanding. As a result, he or she develops perseverance and brain growth, and becomes even more motivated to learn in the future.

