

LEARNING COACH RESOURCE

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 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 our brains actually grow when we are challenged!
- In 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 we **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 they have **already learned.**
- The student **applies what they know** to **learn the new concept.**
- The student **works through the challenge.**

Productive Struggle is:

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

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Destructive Struggle

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

- Your student **becomes overly frustrated** or **gives up**.
- Your student **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 your student **review prior concepts**.
- **Check** to see if there is a **step missing** that will solve the problem.

Destructive Struggle is:

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

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 they will have **difficulty with a task**, help **avoid or minimize frustration** by:

- **Talking through** the problem.
- Providing **emotional support**.
- Encouraging **review of prior concepts** before starting the current task.
- Suggesting **helpful strategies** to approach the solution. Use statements such as, **"Tell me what strategies you've tried so far," "What else can you try?"** or **"What have you learned so far?"**
- **Avoiding** statements such as, **"Try harder"** or **"You'll get it."**
- **Talking to your student** about **how mistakes and struggles lead to brain growth**.

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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 their 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 their knowledge to the new task** and progress to a **deeper understanding**. As a result, they **develop perseverance and brain growth** and become even **more motivated to learn** in the future.