

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

I love that the two authors of our articles this month both referenced science fair projects. Is there any more dreaded parenting task than helping a child navigate this complex assignment? Yet it's a great lesson in how to break up a large task into smaller ones, how to plan ahead, and how to persevere through the inevitable challenges that arise along the way. Even if you don't have any science fair projects on your horizon, I think you'll appreciate the wisdom found in these articles.

—Nicole Balza

WHAT TACTICS DO YOU USE TO ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO TACKLE DIFFICULT TASKS?

"I CAN'T DO IT!" Have you ever heard those words from your child? From tying shoes to book reports to friend problems to choosing a career—problem-solving can be daunting. When our children are faced with difficult tasks, emotions can often overwhelm them, leading them to avoid what needs to be done or even run in the opposite direction. What can parents do to help?

IDENTIFY

When I was in graduate school, I remember feeling like I hit a wall when I was trying to write my thesis. One benefit of being a student was free counseling, so I took advantage. Simply by talking out my swirling thoughts related to topics and deadlines with another person, I was able to break through that wall and move forward. By encouraging our children to verbalize how they are feeling about the task ahead, we can help identify what they need. Are they nervous about trying something new and need encouragement? Do they think they will fail and need to know they are loved unconditionally? Are they unsure about where to start and need help brainstorming? A good question to ask is, "What is the hard part?" That will help them (and you!) get to the source of the difficulty.

GUIDE

As you talk through how to approach a difficult task, resist the urge to take it on yourself. I'm convinced that guiding a child in completing a science project without jumping in and doing it for him is one of the most challenging parenting feats in life (especially if you love science). Remember that experiencing the process of tackling a task is much more important than the quality of the completed task. Open-ended questions can help children explore on their own and exercise their problem-solving muscles. "What would

happen if you tried that?" "Why do you think that will work?" Help them see the value of failure ("Why do you think that didn't work? What can you learn?") and the art of persistence ("What do you want to try next?").

GET PRACTICAL

When my sister and fiancé announced they wanted to get married in two months and invite one thousand people to their wedding, my mom would have had every reason to be overwhelmed. Instead, she stayed calm and got to work. She identified what needed to be done, asked for help, and set up a timeline. Two months later they were married at the county fairgrounds with more than one thousand guests in attendance.

We can help our children approach tasks that seem impossible by breaking the tasks down into small pieces and being intentional with time. Does your son need to clean his room? Maybe he can start with just one drawer or one corner for 15 minutes. Is your daughter having trouble with a friend? Help her brainstorm one kind comment she can share the next day. And although we don't want to complete the task for them, we can encourage our children that it's always good to ask for

HAVE PARENTING QUESTIONS?

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help—from parents, from teachers, and of course from their Savior, who understands difficult tasks.

MODEL

I'm guessing you won't be planning a wedding for one thousand guests anytime soon, but like my mom, you have many opportunities to model problem-solving to your children. Talk out loud as you go about a task so they can hear how you think and feel about it. Ask them for ideas to show the value of asking questions and seeking counsel. Show them your strategies and teach them your tools. Demonstrate how to persevere with patience and joy and hard work. After all, raising children is one of those difficult tasks, and God empowers you to tackle that important work every day.



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WHEN MY KIDS were young, the messes they made were massive. When I instructed them to clean up the playroom, meltdowns quickly ensued. I learned early on to break big tasks down so they're not so overwhelming.

After 15+ years of parenting, I've learned that the best way to break down tasks is to use a timer. I've bought at least ten digital timers so our six kids (ages 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 15) can use them to manage their instrument practice, screen time, required reading, and chores. (Of course, even though we've bought so many timers, they're often all missing. But that's a topic for another day.)

In order to maintain a somewhat tidy home (and preserve my sanity), the whole family pitches in to get the house clean after supper. The weekly job chart tells us which three kids are responsible for supper clean up. I assign the other three kids various clean-up tasks so that the house is tidy before family devotions and bedtime.

After all six kids have made their lunches for the following school day, the kitchen crew groans at what remains. A sink full of dishes, a crumb-laden table, and cluttered countertops feel like way too much for a school night. So, we break it down. "Set the timer for five minutes. Start with the island and let me see it when you're done." Or "I know you have to leave soon for band, so set the timer for seven minutes and work as fast as you can."



PHOTO | iStock

I learned early on to break big tasks down so they're not so overwhelming.

Thanks to Nerf gun battles, creative projects, and an unreasonable number of marble run sets, the playroom is still home to massive messes. "Clean the playroom for five minutes. Start with the big things. Let me know when the timer beeps."

It's not uncommon for me to hear, "But the playroom's already clean!" So, I say, "I want it clean enough to vacuum. Set the timer for five minutes and pick up all the little things. Then call me so I can make sure it's ready."

The timer is also our friend when it comes to long-term school assignments like science fair projects or reports. "Today I want you to set a timer for 20 minutes. Read and take notes about your topic for just that time. That's all for today." Days later, the assignment might be, "Set the timer for 30 minutes and start typing your report. Let me see your progress when the timer beeps."

I actually bought two "Mom-only" timers just for me.

These timers stay at my desk so they don't join the world of missing timers. I use them to help me get started on various work projects. If my to-do list says, "Work on next month's blog posts for one hour," the timer gets me started and helps me avoid the time-sucking vortex of YouTube.

If your kids (or you!) have trouble getting started with difficult tasks, try one (or a dozen) digital timers. Our family couldn't operate without them.



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