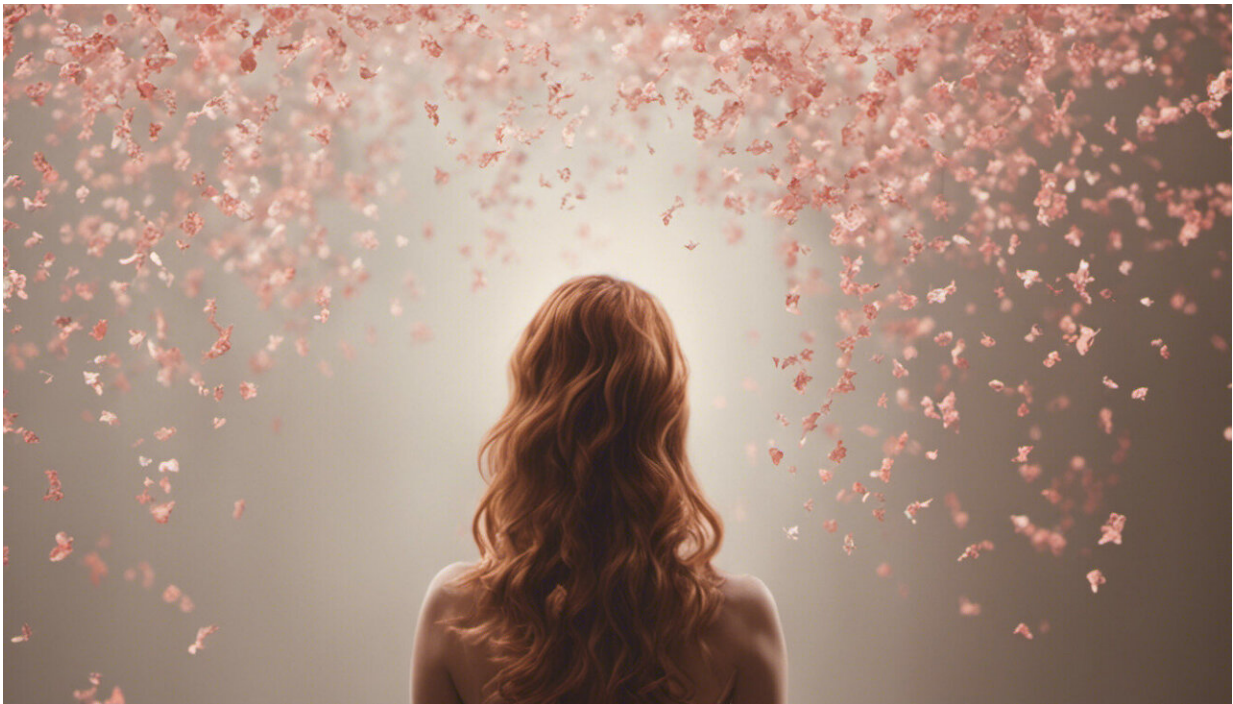


# New research helps to instill persistence in children

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Encouraging children "to help," rather than asking them to "be helpers," can instill persistence as they work to fulfill daily tasks that are difficult to complete, finds a new psychology study.

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The research, conducted by a team of New York University scientists, suggests that using verbs to talk about actions with children, such as encouraging them to help, read, and paint, may help lead to more resilience following the setbacks that they inevitably experience rather than using nouns to talk about identities—for example, asking them to be helpers, readers, or artists.

The results run somewhat counter to those of a 2014 study that showed asking children to "be helpers" instead of "to help" subsequently led them to help more.

The difference between the 2014 work and the new scholarship, both of which appear in the journal *Child Development*, is that the latter tested what happened after children experienced setbacks while trying to help, underscoring how language choice is linked to children's perseverance.

"The new research shows how subtle features of language can shape child behavior in ways not previously understood," explains Marjorie Rhodes, an associate professor in NYU's Department of Psychology and the senior author of the study. "In particular, using verbs to talk to children about behavior—such as 'you can help'—can lead to more determination following setbacks than using nouns to talk about identities—for instance, 'you can be a helper'."

The paper's other authors included Emily Foster-Hanson, an NYU doctoral student who led the study, as well as Andrei Cimpian, an associate professor in NYU's Department of Psychology, and Rachel Leshin, an NYU doctoral student.

The 2014 work, which did not include any of the latest study's

researchers, found that asking children aged 4 to 5 to "be helpers" instead of "to help" subsequently led them to help on more tasks, such as picking up crayons that had fallen on the floor or assisting someone in opening a box that was stuck.

However, the NYU findings showed that this effect backfires after children experienced difficulty while trying to be helpful.

In a series of experiments, children, also aged 4 to 5, were asked either to "be helpers" or "to help," and then were given the opportunity to assist the experimenter in cleaning up some toys. However, the situation was designed so that children would experience difficulties while they tried to help: for example, when children tried to pick up a box to move it to a shelf, the contents, due to a faulty box, spilled all over the floor—a problematic outcome similar to those young children experience in daily life.

The experiment continued with children getting three more opportunities to help the experimenter. The results showed that children who had originally been asked "to help" were more resilient after the [setback](#) than those asked to "be helpers."

After the setbacks, children asked "to help" were just as likely to help in challenging situations that benefited only the experimenter as in easy situations that also benefited themselves. On the other hand, children asked "to be helpers" rarely helped in the challenging situations that benefitted the experimenter—they did so only when it was easy and also benefited themselves.

"This research shows how talking to children about actions they can take—in this case, that they can do helpful things—can encourage more persistence following setbacks than talking to children about identities that they can take on," says Foster-Hanson.

**More information:** Asking children to "be helpers" can backfire after setbacks. [osf.io/wxtzk/](https://osf.io/wxtzk/)

Provided by New York University

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