

Determined Parents, Determined Children

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October 17, 2017/ [Brian Vondruska](#)



Enjoying successes is not always a one-step journey, and often involves setbacks or failure along the way. These difficulties, even if they do not detract from optimism about pure ability to succeed, may still wear down the will to continue. Determination means continuing despite difficulties, overcoming not only the external adversity but also one's own weakened resolve to stay true to the original objective.

"Push" Determination vs. "Pull" Determination

Parents often feel compelled to push children into persevering until a job is completed. But an extrinsic stimulus like an interceding parent cannot effectively impose on his child the mettle to persist. Parental intrusions, harassments, threats, and bribes may indeed instill in the child strong determination, but the wrong kind of determination. I think of it as "push" determination because it is thrust upon the child, driving her to advance through sheer exertion of force.

It is suboptimal because it is either short-lived, misdirected, or emotionally harmful. Push determination is short-lived in the sense that the child may produce an artificial display of fortitude, the facade of which will crumble when the parent is absent and the child is free to direct her own agenda. Push determination is misdirected when the child resents the

invasive tactics and focuses her motivation on resisting her parents instead of on productive endeavors. Push determination is emotionally harmful when the child's doggedness is rooted in fear and insecurity.

Because weakened resolve is an internal impediment, the most effective motivation to move past it is also internally generated. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, the developers of self-determination theory, refer to this as intrinsic motivation.[1] I think of this intrinsically driven motivation as "pull" determination. With pull determination, the child perseveres of her own volition, using her faculties to their full capacity to draw herself to a goal.

Its effectiveness is due to its long-term, goal-directed, and emotionally healthy nature. Pull determination is long term in that it is a skill that the child may call upon when needed for the rest of her life regardless of whether the parent is present. Pull determination is goal-directed, with energies being concentrated on the task at hand because completing that task is personally endorsed as worthy. Pull determination is emotionally healthy because it is rooted in confidence, the belief that the child has the competence to reach the goal. Genuine determination is pull determination. From here on when I use the word determination, I am referring to pull determination.

The Power of Autonomy

Determination is a product of autonomy.[2] When a child is granted autonomy - the agency to govern her activities, to express her individualism through her actions and to purposefully exercise her influence in the world - she becomes intimately invested in her endeavors. By having charge over the course of her activities, she has a personal stake in their eventual success. She becomes engaged in her efforts, knowing that they are the proving grounds for her own ideas. She discovers that making her methods work is both desirable and pleasurable. She develops a feeling of ownership over her tasks.

**Autonomy for children,
within a framework set by parents,
makes determined adults.**

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Autonomy is not to be confused with absolute sovereignty. A child does not simply do anything she pleases without limitation, but rather is granted independence within the framework of the expectations set by her parents. The parents set the overarching structure that the child figures out how stay within. The child defines specific goals and determines how to reach them, when to ask for help, what kind of help to accept, when to take a break to regroup, and when to declare completion. Her sense of ownership is derived from the freedoms she enjoys within the constructs of the larger framework.

Parents may set the overall expectation that the child work up to her ability level at school. The child then decides how to meet that requirement, like which classes to take and how to distribute her time and energy among those classes. She sets specific targets for herself that may include acing a math test, finishing homework by a certain time, or understanding a subject well enough to explain it to a fellow student. The parent can comment on how well the child must have applied herself to learn that tricky math concept. Alternatively, the parent can give feedback on how slacking off on reading assignments today can limit the child's choices in the future.

In another example, parents may offer transportation and financial support for one extracurricular activity. The child then has a wealth of options from which to start. She may decide to play an instrument, to join a sports team, to compete in individual sports, to pursue dance, or a martial art, or theater, or cooking, or painting, or something else, or nothing at all. She can decide where to enroll in these activities and when to schedule lessons and practice sessions. Her skill level targets will be the product of her own desire to fulfill her passion for that activity. The more choices left entirely to the child, the more opportunities she will have to experiment with plowing through setbacks. She will explore, experience, and discover ways to achieve her goals. She will do so because she has formulated the goals herself. She is the sponsor of her efforts, and therefore feels responsibility for their successful completion.

For the child, exercising her autonomy produces ownership of the goal and pride in the performance; for the parents, granting that autonomy produces some degree of risk. Developing a sense of ownership over something may take the child weeks or months, and events leading up to it may not unfold as the parents had hoped. There is a level of uncertainty associated with the handing over of control that makes parents uncomfortable. But handing over control is ultimately what parenting is about. In the end, the output of all parenting efforts is an adult.

Parents who utilize autonomy eventually get engagement and self-direction, skills that will serve the child well as she steers herself through life. Parents who use coercion get immediate compliance, but that which may never develop into adult determination. Push determination is dependent upon factors outside of the child's control and may not materialize when needed. Once genuine determination has been learned, however, it can be called upon at will because it is of intrinsic origin.

Genuine determination, having been mastered in pursuit of endeavors that are stimulating, can then be applied to activities that are far less invigorating. Determination is used to complete tedious work when it would be easier to just leave the job unfinished, like when a child rakes leaves. Determination is why people continue to make attempts despite disappointingly slow progress, like a child learning how to draw her favorite cartoon character. Determination is what drives people to relentlessly press forward against heavy resistance, such as a child fulfilling a commitment to complete an assignment despite having encountered unexpected constraints.

Determined Parents

With an optimistic outlook coupled with an autonomous atmosphere, the stage is set for your child's determination to thrive. But don't simply take the chance that determination will arise of its own accord because you have invited it. Show your child what determination is supposed to look like. Exhibit determination in your daily life. Be determined.

**Narrate your struggles
as you navigate them
to teach your children determination.**

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You can make your struggles "public" so your child can see how you approach difficulties. When saddled with the mundanity of doing taxes, you can express both your boredom and your firmness of purpose to get it done. Your child may have difficulty relating to your struggles, so you can help her to understand. You can explain the similarity between your tax filing and her leaf raking, how both jobs require doing something that one does not want to do. After you have

finished your taxes, you can emphasize how hard you worked and how proud you feel because of that work. It explicitly demonstrates your determination, and is good practice for recognizing the efforts and determination of a child as she copes with the emotional vicissitudes of difficult jobs.

While making home repairs that require more trips to the hardware store than expected, you can staunchly insist to yourself aloud that you will complete the job, and then do so. You can draw parallels between a home repair project that is tricky to complete and a cartoon character that is tricky to draw. When your initial attempts are unsuccessful, you can note that those setbacks are temporary and surmountable much like cartoon hands that don't look right. You can explore why setbacks happened and what you learned from them. You can verbalize "I'm not quitting," even when you have to start over from scratch, like crumpling up a piece of paper and starting fresh. You can take inventory of what you have learned so far and how far you need to go. You can reflect on your eventual success and how you got there as a result of some failures. Your narrative of the home improvement project will make an impression on your child. It will then feel familiar to her when you mirror that narrative by chronicling her artistic progress with the cartoon character and recounting her creative adaptations to setbacks. It will help make the process of learning through failure seem natural, impersonal, and necessary.

When facing headwinds, you can be an example for how to remain steadfast despite the strong resistance. Some of your strongest headwinds will come from your child herself, in the form of defiance. There will be times when her opposition to your authority will be justified and worthy of consideration. But there will also be times when there is no room for negotiation, when rules must be enforced without debate and you must stand your ground. In these circumstances you get to demonstrate consistency and persistence. You get to draw a line and do what you said you were going to do even though it is not convenient.

There is a tone of voice that you can develop for these types of situations, and when used correctly it will be incredibly powerful. In order for it to work you must convince yourself that the child will comply, and gently but firmly make your statement. Your words will demonstrate your position, and the way in which they are delivered will demonstrate your seriousness. Look directly into your child's eyes and speak with conviction. Speak with absolute self-assurance and certitude, as if your words were a stake that you have just pushed into the earth. Mastering the right tone of voice will take practice. It says "I mean what I say, I intend to follow through, and I love you." When done right, your child will feel the weight of your words and the finality they represent. And she will learn how resoluteness sounds, how it feels, and what it looks like, so she will eventually be able to deliver it.

Determined Children

Five-year old Son delivered it after a lengthy dinner that did not end until bedtime. I told him that there was no time for piano practice, and his homework log would have to remain blank for that day. He found that to be unacceptable. He wanted to have the boxes checked off for each and every assignment. I argued that I would not help him with his homework because I was busy cleaning the kitchen, and Mom would not help him because she was busy getting Daughter ready for bed. These reasons were not good enough for Son. He balled up his fists and said with words as solid as a brick wall, "I will not go to my piano lesson on Saturday without all my checks," and then walked to the piano and began playing scales all by himself. I can't be certain whether he was pushed to the piano bench by the prospect of a completed homework log or pulled there by his own desires, but he earned his homework checks that night.

A determined child will find a way to persist through the drudgery of raking a yard full of leaves. She will flounder while drawing that cartoon character, yet continue to practice and discover for herself the best techniques to use until she succeeds. She will work against resistance to meet her commitments, like resolutely completing homework assignments.

As her determination flourishes, she can learn how to apply it to her long-term goals. In the field of psychology, and as popularized by Angela Duckworth, long-term determination is referred to as "grit." It is characterized by the courage to set long-term goals, potentially spanning years, and the stamina to see them through to completion, no matter the headwinds, delays, and setbacks.^[3] Long-term determination involves doing difficult things that require prolonged effort without regular feedback. It requires a combination of zeal and persistence of motive.

As your child's determination grows with her growth, so should your example. So, do difficult things. Exhibit grit. You

have high expectations for your child, so it is only fair that you also set high expectations for yourself. Set long-range goals and then work to meet them. Learn a language, or learn how to play an instrument, or earn a degree, or tackle a major home improvement project, or save coins for a sizable purchase, or write a book, or anything else that will excite and challenge you. Talk about your enjoyment of doing things that are hard, and the exhilarating feeling of gratification when you make improvements. Publicize your struggles, failures, and eventual attainment of your expectations as before, only on a longer time scale.

The high expectations that you set for yourself and for your child are a form of optimism. They are implicit statements of belief. Every so often, however, they should be made explicit. A child should know that her parents have faith in her abilities. Your optimism will rouse her own optimism and help stoke the flames of determination. This concept is best captured by the company Avon, who states in their core values that belief empowers people to be their best: "Believe in someone – and show it – and that person will move mountains to prove you're right."^[4]

A determined child will use all that she has, leaving nothing on the field. She will stay up late, skip meals, and try over and over again if that's what it takes to meet her objectives. She will make her impact with blood, sweat, and tears. She will pour her entire self into an effort, and she will get it done.

Author's Note: This is the sixth in a collection of posts about [the example you set](#). Six different behaviors are to be covered. Read about compassion [here](#), honesty [here](#), fairness [here](#), and optimism [here](#).

- *What ways do you use optimism at home with your children?*
- *When do you find it challenging to be optimistic?*

Please share your comments below.

[1] Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Angela L. Duckworth, et al., "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087.

[4] "Avon Values and Principles," *Avon Company*, accessed May 15, 2016, <http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/history/values.html>.

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