



When Children Say ‘I Can’t,’ but They Can, and Adults Know It

By
[Jessica Lahey](#)

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Over the last couple of months, I’ve received a few emails asking a similar question, venting a similar frustration, written in a similar exasperated tone. When I hit “send” on my own version of the question in an email to a friend, I knew it was time to seek some answers. I appealed to a few of my favorite parenting experts and authors, [Katie Hurley](#), [Michele Borba](#), [Alyson Schafer](#) and [Tina Payne Bryson](#).

Dearest Parenting Experts,

What advice do you have for dealing with feigned incompetence in previously capable, competent children? When a student suddenly regresses, claiming they can’t complete skills I know they have mastered, or when a child suddenly loses [the ability to do the laundry](#), say, flailing his boneless, ineffectual arms about as he jabs at buttons on the washing machine, wailing all the while that he can’t possibly do laundry; it’s too hard.

Later that day, the experts responded, and the consensus was clear: the first step toward understanding why children engage in this frustrating behavior is to adjust my language and perspective. This isn’t feigned incompetence, they stressed, but learned incompetence.

Ms. Schafer suggested parents and teachers consider what a child gains from the behavior. In school, the behavior could be set off by a fear of failure, or a need to maintain an image of effortless perfection to teachers or peers. Some children pretend to be incompetent so they won’t have to out themselves as actually incompetent.

Others, particularly those who suffer from anxiety, feel as if they can’t control the outcomes in their life, so they give up before they begin to avoid disappointment, frustration or embarrassment. I see this quite often in students who test poorly, and react to my concerns over their lack of engagement with: “Why should I even try? I’m just going to fail again.”

For children with serious anxiety around failure, Ms. Hurley said parents and teachers should not avoid tasks or situations that can lead to children's anxiety. Rather, "they should encourage anxious kids to face difficult situations while empowering them to work through their anxiety. Anxious kids need to face their fears in order to internalize the belief that they can overcome obstacles and control outcomes."

"In the tween years, acting incompetent can be a way of exhibiting power, to convey that they are no longer little kids who can be ordered around," Ms. Schafer wrote. This behavior is particularly apparent when friends are around. "Friendships play an essential role in self-esteem during the teenage years, so social acceptance may trump any need to appear competent," Dr. Borba noted. As is the case with so many aspects of parenting and teaching tweens and teenagers, pick your battles and minimize conflict during moments they may resist for the sake of resisting.

Dr. Bryson suggests that parents may want to consider how our demands on children's time and attention feel from the child's point of view. "Adults do what we do when we're in the mood to do it," she said. "Yet we often demand that kids do stuff when we are in the mood for them to do it." We dictate when they work on math, when they switch to Spanish, and for how long. By the time they get home, they have already endured nine or 10 hours of this lack of autonomy, so a little bit of choice and flexibility at home goes a long way toward securing cooperation.

All of that said, for many children, acting incompetent is simply a practical strategy: They know from experience that if they stall, delay or refuse to do something they don't want to do, someone will eventually do it for them. I know I've done this; my child is fumbling about in an attempt to finish a task, it's taking too long, we have to get out the door or I just want to get the dishwasher started, and before I know it, "Here, just let me do it" or "maybe your work partner could complete that part of the project" has escaped my lips, and I have become, once again, a master educator in the skill of learned incompetence.

Ms. Hurley says that she sees learned incompetence in her clients who have recently been told they have learning disabilities, and this can be a real challenge for their teachers. "Their parents go to great lengths to 'help' their kids and let them off the hook for age-appropriate chores, tasks and responsibilities because they want to protect them," she said. "The urge to shield and rescue can be strong, but it's important to empower children with learning disabilities so they can internalize the fact that they can overcome challenges."

The answer may be straightforward, of course: The task really is too hard. Children's displays of incompetence may not be a strategy, but cries for help from a genuinely overwhelmed or over-stressed child. The trick, for both teachers and parents, is know when to hold back and let children struggle a bit, and when to help out when a task is truly beyond their ability.

Whether children act incompetent out of anxiety, calculated strategy, an unwillingness to engage or frustration, it's important to stay as positive and supportive as tempers and patience will allow. Our job, as parents and teachers, is to guide them away from the temptations of dependence and toward a sense that they themselves can take on most tasks — and that when they're not yet fully competent, they'll learn.

Jessica Lahey is an educator, writer and speaker and the author of [“The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed.”](#) Find her at JessicaLahey.com.