

What to Say When a Child Says, “I’m Not Good at This.”

A quick classroom guide for PreK–2 teachers

The moment you see

A child tries something new: tying their shoes, reading a word, drawing something unfamiliar.

It doesn’t work the first time.

Then they say:

“I can’t do this.”

“I’m bad at this.”

“I’m not good at this.”

In that moment, something important is happening. The child shifts from thinking about the problem to thinking about themselves.

If that self-judgment takes hold, many children stop trying or begin to believe they aren’t capable.

But this same moment can also become an opening for learning.

A different response: curiosity

When something feels hard, curiosity helps children stay engaged.

Instead of asking, *“Am I good at this?”* curiosity shifts the focus to *“What can I learn here?”*

Mistakes become information instead of proof that a child can’t do something.

Put another way: **Curiosity begins where judgment ends.**

And when children stay curious, they keep learning.

What curiosity sounds like

When a child feels stuck, try questions that invite exploration.

Try asking:

- **“What do you notice?”**
- **“What could we try next?”**
- **“What part is working so far?”**
- **“What might help us figure this out?”**
- **“What are you curious about here?”**

Questions like this help children stay connected to the process instead of shutting down.

A phrase students can learn

Sometimes it helps to introduce a short phrase students can remember when something feels hard.

You might say: **“Let’s choose curiosity.”**

When a child says, “I’m not good at this,” the phrase gently shifts the moment.

Instead of judging themselves, students are reminded to stay curious and keep exploring. Over time, students begin saying the phrase themselves.

A quick classroom prompt

Sometimes the whole class benefits from hearing this idea.

You might ask, “Have you ever thought you weren’t good at something... but later figured it out?”

Students quickly realize they’re not the only ones who struggle sometimes because learning takes time.

The story behind the idea

This idea is explored in the picture book, *It’s Okay Not to Know* by Brenda Do.

The story helps children discover that not knowing is where learning begins.

Because when something doesn’t work the first time, it doesn’t mean they’re not capable. It simply means they’re learning something new.

Choose curiosity.

Feel free to print, copy, and share this guide with other teachers or staff who may find it helpful.