

“*The Little Book of Talent* should be give to every graduate at commencement, every new parent in the delivery room, every executive on the first day of work. It is a guidebook — beautiful in its simplicity and backed by hard science — for nurturing excellence.”

—Charles Duhigg, Bestselling Author of *The Power of Habit*

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The Most Powerful 3-Letter Word a Parent or Teacher Can Use

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[Next »](#)

Kids love to announce that they’re not good at something. They usually do it just after they try something new and challenging, and they say it with finality, as if issuing a verdict.

“I’m not good at math!” or, “I’m not good at volleyball.”

At that moment, our normal parental/teacher/coach instinct is to fix the situation. To boost the kid up by saying something persuasive like, “Oh yes you are!” Which never works, because it puts the kid in the position of actively defending their ineptitude. It’s a lose-lose.

So here’s another idea: ignore the instinct to fix things. Don’t try to persuade. Instead, simply add the word “yet.”

You add the “yet” quietly, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if you were describing the weather or the law of gravity.

“I’m not good at math” becomes “You’re not good at math yet.”

“I’m not good at volleyball” becomes “You’re not good at volleyball yet.”

The message: Of *course* you’re not good — because you haven’t worked at it. But when you do, you will be good.

At first glance, it seems silly — how can just one word make a difference?

The answer has to do with the way our brains are wired to respond to self-narratives. That’s where our friend Dr. Carol Dweck and her work on mindset come in. Through a series of [remarkable experiments](#), she’s shown how small changes in language — even a few words — can affect performance.



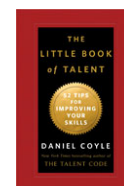
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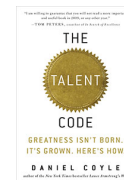
Daniel Coyle is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Talent Code*, *Lance Armstrong's War*, *The Secret Race* and *Hardball: A Season in the Projects*. His new book, *The Little Book of Talent*, releases in August 2012.

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Her core insight is that the way we frame questions of talent matter hugely. If we put the focus on “natural ability,” kids tend to be less engaged and put forth less effort (after all, if it’s just a genetic lottery, then why should I try?). When we put the focus on effort, however, kids tend to try harder and are more engaged.

In other words, it’s all about the story, because the story creates the culture.

I happen to spend most of the year in Cleveland, Ohio, where each year the area’s teams invent new and innovative ways to lose — it’s the Silicon Valley of sports futility. Because everybody at some level (players, coaches, fans) subconsciously expects to lose. It’s a vicious cultural circle.

On the other hand, Cleveland is also home to a number of remarkable elementary and high schools that are precisely the opposite of its sports teams: strong, positive cultures where every signal is aligned with values of risk, learning, and growth. Inside the walls of these schools, it’s all about virtuous circles: feedback loops that energize and motivate.

It’s no coincidence that this “Yet” idea comes from one of these places: [Laurel School](#), where my ninth-grade daughter happens to be enrolled. The head of school, on reading Dweck’s work, decided to make “Yet” the school’s new watchword. And in a short time, it’s caught on, traveling through the culture like a virus. Teachers are saying it. Kids are saying it. They’ve even printed it on bumper stickers (above).

Yes, it’s kinda corny, like these things tend to be. I’m sure some teens roll their eyes when they hear it. But I also think it has an effect, because “yet” tells a clear story about the value of effort and struggle, and that story is aligned with the way the brain grows.

Which makes me wonder: what other ways do you parents, teachers, and coaches tell your story and establish your cultures? Are there recurrent words/phrases – or, on the other hand, certain words that are off-limits? I’d love to hear your examples and suggestions.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, December 11th, 2012 at 10:11 am. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

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20 Responses to “The Most Powerful 3-Letter Word a Parent or Teacher Can Use”

▶  **Johanna Hedgårdh** says:

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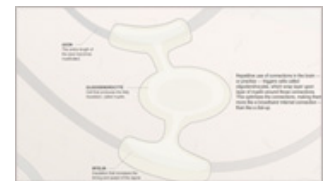
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December 11, 2012 at 11:08 am

This is so good and I would gladly use it if we where an english speaking country.;) In Swedish this word sounds really weak. But on the other hand I have another tip. Kids tend to say “I can-t do this!” before they have even tried. Me and my husband who has done a lote of sports learned this from a swedish sports psychologist: just say, “- “Ok, but if you could, how would you do it?” Suddenly something happens and kids and grownups too for that matter sees things from another perspective. If I could run a marathon, how would I do it? With a different mindset I believe we can do a whole lot more than we think. No news really. ;) // Johanna Hedgårdh.

► Vern Gambetta

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►  *Brendan* says:

December 11, 2012 at 11:54 am

I teach at a high school where, like long-term athletic development, I encourage this idea of “yet” and I see two things: 1. kids struggling (especially my freshman) but many of whom, eventually, “get it” (somewhere along their high school journey). I continually encourage them that it is a long-term process. 2. However, many times over-anxious parents fervently believe that their child can’t make academic mistakes and there’s no time for “yet.” There has to be academic success “now” as they believe any misstep means their child can’t get to UCLA/Berkeley/Stanford/Brown/etc. Unfortunately, the parents are valuing the end result more so than valuing growth.

►  *Casey* says:

December 11, 2012 at 12:10 pm

You beat me to the punch! I was about to write something about “yet.” Anytime one of my athletes says a labeling statement that is negative, the either have to reframe it, or add yet at the end. I guess better you than me, writing this as your audience is slightly (thousands) more than mine. So i’ll let it slide....

►  *Ray Asher* says:

December 11, 2012 at 12:45 pm

Dan, I provided a copy of this page to the principal of my youngest son’s school today (and ordered both “Code” books). I am also going to incorporate this three letter word in the locker room (I coach high school baseball). I am embarrassed that I did not incorporate this word more frequently into my parenting. No “do-overs.” Best regards. Ray

►  *Rob Gurden* says:

December 11, 2012 at 2:14 pm

Hi Daniel,

I love your blogs and your new book. I was wondering if there’s any way to create a Printable Form of your blog entries because I like to hand them out to my staff to improve their coaching as well as give them to my players who have aspirations of excellence. Thanks and keep up the good work! Cheers, Rob

▶  *JJ Baxter* says:

December 11, 2012 at 3:28 pm

Great article! As a coach for many many years, it is a word I have used often. Another effective use of positive reinforcement or as you put it “off limits” words are the three negatives.....can’t, won’t, and don’t. It takes some practice eliminating these esteem crushers, but the reward is new and creative ways of conveying the message. If you are so lucky to see this in action with the same kids over a period of time, you will soon witness them not even realizing what they are attempting is actually difficult. Whatever level the bar was set at before will be surpassed and exceeded as if that had a life of its own.

▶  *Walter* says:

December 11, 2012 at 5:56 pm

Thinking along the same lines as you Daniel. As a youth soccer coach i don’t know how many times i hear kids say “I can’t do that” or ” I suck at juggling the ball”! I always tell them they might not be good at it NOW because they haven’t put the time into it to get better, BUT..... Once they put the time in they will see a huge difference. Kids can actually go from juggling the ball 5 times to 10 by the end of a 10 minute session with simple tips and techniques. They often surprise themselves

▶  *bill dorenkott* says:

December 12, 2012 at 12:30 pm

Excellent post. I am a firm believer in the power of words. Our choices in framing or reframing words, thoughts and actions, as coaches/teachers, are what set apart those who empower their charges to achieve from those who fall short.

Here are a few examples of how we use words/phrases in our sport environment...

Our staff is very careful in using words that denote an absolute outcome or effort: always, never, must, can’t, won’t etc. We have had numerous kids who have achieved at a high level because we did not allow them to subscribe to the idea that there are absolutes in the pursuit of excellence. Success comes in different shapes, sizes and progressions.

The team is well aware of my word-driven pet-peeves. My favorite example....the word “problem” makes me cringe. It is a word that often leads to strategies such as avoidance. My replacement word is “challenge” as most people enjoy a challenge.

Further, we encourage our student-athletes to refrain from qualifying their performance/effort with limiting words or phrases. “That is a pretty good time, for me” or “I am having a good training session, so far”.

As it relates to training, we do not allow an athlete to simply state “I am tired” as if that alone absolves one of any responsibility for performance. The corresponding question to the statement would be along the lines of “are you

sleep tired, muscle tired, school tired, weight room tired etc?”. We equate it to going in to see your physician and simply saying “I am sick”.

From a goal-setting perspective, we caution young people on the use of conjunctions (if, and, or, but) as it relates to setting future goals. For example, “I want to make the varsity soccer team, but I also want to have time to spend with friends on weekends” or “I would like to be a Big Ten Champion, but I am not sure about training year-round”.

Lastly, as a Cleveland native I appreciate and agree with your observations on the differing cultures within the city. I had the good fortune of reading a book, at a young age, written by a fellow Clevelander who subscribed to many of the same philosophies promoted in this blog. The book is *The Edge* and was written by Howard Ferguson. I would highly recommend it. While the book is somewhat dated, the principles still hold true. Ironically, one of the first pages of the book speaks to the idea that with hard work one will always reach their goals, eventually (yet).



Doc says:

December 12, 2012 at 2:06 pm

Might be interesting to see what would happen if you just agreed with them to see how many would fold and how many would change their attitude and set out to prove you wrong. However, I wouldn't be willing to throw some kids under the bus just to see. Wonder if an experiment could be designed to find out without taking the chance of ruining some kids.



Irwin Hamilton says:

December 13, 2012 at 4:48 pm

I am a ski coach in Whistler Blackcomb and I teach only seniors, age 55 and up. My oldest student is 76. It is a great job because they all want to learn and they have patience. I teach a system called Primary Movement Teaching System (PMTS) which is ideal for seniors as the method requires less energy but provides better performance than the traditional teaching methods. Many times I have heard “I can't do that” as a statement of fact. I used to re-phrase that to “you aren't doing, not you can't do it.” Now I will just add the word “yet” to their statement of fact, which makes it a whole different statement. Thanks for the tip, this is one of many you have provided to help me be a better coach.



Pat says:

December 13, 2012 at 11:20 pm

There's nothing better than a short clear story about the value of effort and struggle. Here's another. *Keep It Up* (The art of Everyday Earnest Effort).



djcoyle says:

December 14, 2012 at 8:51 am

Coach Bill,

That is outstanding, targeted, useful stuff — thanks so much for sharing it. I'm

going to get my copy of The Edge right now. All best, Dan

▶  *Ricardo* says:

December 15, 2012 at 10:59 pm

I agree on the importance of using the adequate words. I just want to comment on the risk of using these “techniques” for every activity that kids do. Excellence has a lot to do with focus. I think that pushing kids to excel in every single activity (using for example the “yet” constantly) can make kids mad. What do you think? Depends also if you & the kid already know what are his strengths and potential?

▶  *Paul Miller* says:

December 18, 2012 at 12:30 pm

As a school teacher and coach I adjust the use of the word ‘Test’. In the classroom for teachers, it’s banned. I promote the word ‘Quiz’ instead. It completely changes their mindset. They actually start to look forward to it rather than fear and dread the questions or practice exam questions.

On the rugby pitch, we like ‘Test’. ‘Challenge’ is good but ‘Test’ just feels more like we are being examined and being pressure tested. I ask the guys to workout the answer to whatever is ‘testing us’. Or I say “Today will be a physical test, this team will try and out work you, but remember we are tried and tested and you will out work this team if you choose to.”

Language is truly powerful as you and Dweck have shown me but I think it is situationally specific.

▶  *Andrew* says:

January 3, 2013 at 5:53 pm

A couple of thoughts – none of which have been developed any further than these brain dumps:

This is great, “yet” certainly turns a negative into a not so negative. I was just thinking it can be reinforced by pointing out what someone has achieved in the past – past “can’t”s that are now “can”s. For example “I can’t spell wheelbarrow”, which is countered with “You weren’t able to spell “light” but now you can – this is just the next step”. The point is to show that they have already grown, so there is no reason for them not to keep growing.

For caring/feeling types, throwing in a reminder of how they felt when they succeeded the last time might also help.

I also like Johanna’s method. I can see this working well with analytical types and possibly creative types – although getting thought into action could still be the challenge.

For leader types, asking how they they make someone else do it might get them thinking. Or better yet, getting them to teach someone else how to do whatever they are struggling could get them moving forward.

▶  *Bertrand* says:

January 6, 2013 at 2:49 am

In French, kids are very often saying “je suis nul” (for a boy) or “je suis nulle” (for a girl) which means “I am zero”. I keep them changing the word and replacing it by “I am perfectible” (je suis perfectible) because if you exist then you can’t be “zero”... and it works...

▶  *djcoyle* says:

January 8, 2013 at 7:37 am

Bertrand, I really like that. “Perfectible” is such a great word — like “yet” but stronger, because it implies a process. Plus, it sounds great in French.

▶  *James* says:

January 10, 2013 at 8:47 pm

I am excited about all the things I want to be able to do that I can’t do, yet.

▶  *NicolineKD* says:

January 19, 2013 at 12:15 am

Yes! The power of the words we use as teachers does make a world of difference! I will make sure I add the word “yet” to my practice.

My other favorite, much like the poster from Sweden is as follows.

Student: I don’t know.

Teacher: Okay. That’s fine. If you did know what do you think you would say?

It is amazing how this so often works in making the student’s thinking visible. More often than not the student will share his or her thinking.

Another one we with young children setting goals for learning letters, numbers, or , high frequency words is to sort flash cards into three piles. Words I know. Words I almost know. Words I will learn soon.

▶  *Sara* says:

March 8, 2013 at 2:30 pm

When my 11 year old feels defeated by something I tell her ‘Practice makes progress.’ When she hears people say ‘practice makes perfect’ she tells them that perfect does not exist as with more hard work everything can be improved.

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