

When your child says “I can’t”... what they actually mean (and what to say instead)



By The OT Collective

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A simple OT guide to supporting kids through tricky tasks...

Reframe

When a child says “I can’t do it”... they usually don’t mean *can’t*.

They might mean:

- “This feels too hard”
- “I don’t know where to start”
- “I’m worried I’ll get it wrong”
- “My brain is overwhelmed”

This isn’t a motivation problem.
It’s a **capacity and confidence problem**.

Why “just do it” doesn’t work

When we say:

- “Just try”
- “You can do it”
- “You know how”

We’re asking a child to push through **without support**.

And when something feels too hard, kids often shut down instead.

What to say instead

Try these instead:

- “Let’s do it together”
- “What’s the first tiny step?”
- “I’ll stay with you while you start”
- “This feels tricky, hey?”
- “We can figure it out together”

What you're actually building

When you support instead of push, you're building:

- confidence
- problem solving
- persistence
- emotional safety

Confidence doesn't come from being told "you can"...

*It comes from **experiencing that you can.***

"I can't" is often a child asking for support... not refusing to try.