

THE TWO TEACHERS METAPHOR

Jennifer Kemp, Clinical Psychologist

The 'Two Teachers Metaphor' was developed by Professor Paul Gilbert (2009) to illustrate the hostile and self-destructive ways we talk to ourselves. This worksheet demonstrates how we as adults, can offer ourselves greater compassion.



Imagine you are the parent of a small child who is just starting school. Your child is a normally developing five-year-old, and as such, they find reading, writing, and sitting still challenging. Your child has two teachers.

The first teacher focuses on everything your child is doing wrong. They constantly point out your child's mistakes and get irritated easily. This teacher tries to make your child feel bad about what they are doing, and using a cold and harsh tone of voice they say things to your child like:

"The other children are sitting down nicely. Why can't you?"

"You need to try harder."

"Why aren't you focusing on your work?"

"You should be doing better at this by now."

"The other kids can do this—what's wrong with you?"

The second teacher is warm and understanding. They look for the strengths in your child and find opportunities for them to use these skills in class. They celebrate your child's successes and encourage them to take pride in their work, saying things like:

"I see that you are struggling with this - let's work out what help you need"

"I like what you've done here - can you do more of that?"

"How about we go over this again?"

"Let's do a bit more of this together before you go out to play"



Which teacher would you like for your child? (Circle one.)

The first teacher

The second teacher

Which teacher is most likely to help your child learn, grow, and build their confidence? (Circle one.)

The first teacher

The second teacher

Describe the personal qualities this teacher has that would most help your child:

Which teacher sounds like the way you talk to yourself? (Circle one.)

The first teacher

The second teacher

The Two Teachers metaphor illustrates how the way you treat yourself can influence not only your sense of well-being but also your ability to learn and grow. The personal qualities showed by the second teacher including being:

1. Warm, gentle, and kind
2. Empathetic and understanding
3. Accepting (non-judgmental)
4. Motivated to help
5. Encouraging and supportive while still holding your child accountable to complete the work (“Let’s do a bit more of this together before you go out and play.”)

It’s likely the way you talk to yourself is most like the first teacher. Consider how much this might undermine your learning, growth, and confidence over time.

If you believe you must be hard on yourself or else you will be lazy and unproductive, pay close attention to what the second teacher is doing. The second teacher demonstrates how you can be warm and kind to yourself while still holding yourself accountable for achieving amazing work. This kind of self-talk is energizing and motivating rather than demoralizing and overwhelming.

These are the qualities and skills of self-compassion and you can learn them.



Reference: Gilbert, P. (2009). *The Compassionate Mind*. London: Robinson.