

Teaching Your Child to fail

By Diana Reeves

"They won't stick together! I quit!"
Aaron, Age 3

"So the rest of the girls thought I was harassing them and they complained to the teacher. I was really upset. I didn't want to disappoint my parents."
Addi, age 14

"This isn't supposed to look like this. It looks terrible. I don't feel well."
LeToya, age 8

"I really messed up in honors Algebra; I'm going for 'dumb math' next term."
Eric, Age 16



All of these kids have experienced failure in one way or another. How they dealt with it depended largely upon the ways that their families and teachers prepared them to cope with the disappointment, frustration and, yes, learning opportunities inherent in not achieving a desired outcome.

Who among us has never failed—in a job, a relationship, on the tennis court? Winner worship is embedded early. Society suggests that the ultimate put-down is “loser” and failure is the ultimate f-word. But, we could pay a terrible price for our loser loathing: What better way to avoid failing than to never enter the fray?

Fear of failure starts early in life, and is common among high achievers. From their earliest years, many gifted children are successful in almost everything they try because they are under challenged, and paradoxically, become failure-avoidant. And, when we parents always encourage our children to get the highest grade or to be “the best,” we may be discouraging them from seeking challenges that are optimal for their level of possible accomplishment. We adults in their lives also need to take risks and to model a growth mindset prepared to cope with all possible outcomes.

Embrace Mistakes

High-level achievement should be encouraged, but it is important to teach how to set priorities, and to model taking time to reflect on the value of mistakes. Learning to set achievable goals is a big part of avoiding failure. Teaching task commitment—sticking with something until it is successfully completed—can be a delicate dance.

Children need to learn when to let go of a project, but also need to realize that very few masterpieces were created on the first try. When projects are displayed or graded, it is always useful to have students respond to these questions:

- What have you done?
- What did you learn?
- What would you have done or learned with more time?
 - What will you do differently next time?

When things go wrong, they can be corrected and can serve as a learning experience. A candid admission that you are wrong is the first step in getting it right the next time.

Manage Time

We can't do everything that we would like to do. Not everything worth doing can be done equally well.

With the hurried pace and information overload that describes most of our lives, kids

need to practice time management. Making mistakes often means that a problem has not been thoroughly thought through.

When teaching our children to fail safely, we need to pay specific attention to sharing with them how we make decisions by previewing outcomes, evaluating choices, and reviewing previous mistakes.

Absorb Disappointment & Modeling Behavior

An important part of surviving failure is the development of resilience. Resilient people are able to absorb disappointment because of a belief in themselves and a connection to others. A resilient child has confidence in her decision-making ability. Parents who can demonstrate their failures and intentionally share their thoughts and feelings about them model resilient behavior. They teach their children how to cope with disappointment.

It's a parent's responsibility to set clear limits and to follow through with appropriate consequences. Everyone needs to agree upon an acceptable level of performance or behavior, before the task is undertaken. Children need to learn to accept responsibility for their mistakes, rather than being prevented from doing so by well-meaning parents who wish to shield them from any negative experiences. A child who refuses to wear boots in the rain will not suffer irreparable harm from sitting through the school day in wet sneakers.

Develop Islands of Competence

Psychologist Robert Brooks suggests helping your child develop "islands of competence." Being very good at something—and knowing that you are good at it—can reinforce confidence and self-worth when encountering difficulties or roadblocks.¹

In a family or classroom, knowing the personal strengths and weaknesses of each member can be valuable in fostering cooperation and teamwork. Adults do this all the time. We hire someone to help us with our taxes if we lack the time or talent to do them



well. Kids need to understand that no one can do everything perfectly, that some failure is unavoidable, and that examination of mistakes can lead to improvement and correction the next time.

Separate Failure from the Child

Anyone who has failed in some way needs to feel that he belongs and that he can still make a difference in the world. Separating the failure from the child is a place to start. Reinforcing that "No matter what you say or do, there is nothing that will stop me loving you," is a preventative vaccine which should be administered early on, with booster shots given periodically though the rest of one's life.

Share and Care

Teaching children to cope with failure requires that we reveal ourselves—our manners of decision making, habits of dealing with frustration, and entrenched patterns of thought. Just as we aim to teach the whole child, we must aim to teach from the whole of ourselves.

Our inner resources register deeply with our children. If anything can prepare a child for life's inevitable failures, it is time spent in the presence of loving adults who are willing

to share their wisdom and care enough to provide meaningful guidance. ☺

Resources

- Costa, A.C. (2002). *Habits of mind*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.
- Moon, S. (2003). Direct methods of developing personal talent. *Images*, Fall, 23–24.
- Sternberg, R.J. (2003). *Self-activation versus self-sabotage*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Author's Note

Diana Reeves is a certified parent discussion group facilitator, university instructor, and education consultant. As a former parent representative on the NAGC Board of Directors, Diana helped develop NAGC's *Mile Marker Series*, received the NAGC 2009 Community Service Award, and co-authored an NAGC-sponsored e-book on forming gifted and talented parent advocacy groups.

This article is based on her presentation, *Fostering Habits of Success: PACK FIRST for the Journey*, which has been shared with audiences at the Alabama Association for Gifted Children's state conference, Massachusetts Association for Gifted Education parent and educator conferences throughout New England, and the NAGC 59th Annual Convention in Denver.

Failing regularly, she now wishes to share her experiences and observations as a means of helping parents, administrators, and teachers successfully prepare children for life's journey.

Endnote

- ¹ Brooks, R. (2007). The search for islands of competence: A metaphor for hope and strength. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 16(1), pp. 11–15.