

Helping Children Deal With Failure

Helping our children become the caring, competent learners they all can be is more challenging today than at any other time. Modern society's adoration of "success" and "achievement" at all costs—in academics, sports, business, arts, etc.—has made failure unacceptable. The reason this is so challenging is because failure plays an essential role in all real learning.

Parents, and even principals, will do almost anything to prevent their children from experiencing the pain that failure can bring. "Helicopter parents" are commonly found today interceding on their children's behalf with principals, teachers, coaches, and even college professors.

While we all want to protect our children from themselves, if we prevent them from developing a healthy way to look at failure, we are increasing the likelihood that they will avoid any task or challenge that might cause them to fail.

Failures happen. That's just a fact of life, and we need to help our children understand that they will fail in all sorts of ways throughout their lives. The key lesson to impart is that how they look at those failures and how they respond to them make all the difference, and both are completely within their control.

Failure is one of the most common and most powerful ways that human beings of any age learn anything. A baby will try hundreds of different methods to stay upright while learning to walk, discarding the ones that fail, and trying others to find the one that leads to walking. Student writers arrange words into sentences and paragraphs only to reconstruct them again and again until the result meets the standard that they, or their teachers, have set.

Think about it this way: If "fail" and "learn" are so closely tied, a parent who says "I don't want my child to fail" might actually be saying "I don't want my child to learn."

The same goes for principals. Children are going to experience failures at school—on assignments, on tests, on

an athletic field, on stage. We and they must adopt an attitude that sees those failures as a way of discovering what needs to be learned. Incorrect answers on tests show us precisely where the holes are in our knowledge and sometimes in our instruction. That's a healthy, growth-oriented way to look at mistakes, as opposed to focusing only on the grade (whether poor or high).

The key is to remember that we will need to change our children's attitude about failure before we will see any change in their behavior. Here are three steps to take.


1. Make your values clear. Children need to know that you, as a leader, have a special appreciation for people who persevere and stick to a task in spite of setbacks. Whenever you see examples of people who overcome obstacles rather than give in, make it a point to praise this tenacity as you talk with children.

Athletes who experienced failures yet overcame them through dogged persistence should be the ones who are held up as models. (For example, basketball great Michael Jordan was cut from his high school team; soccer star Lionel Messi was told that he was too small to play the sport well.) Historical figures (such as Abraham Lincoln, Walt Disney, Dr. Seuss, and many others) who rose to greatness in spite of repeated failures should become heroes in your school.

2. Build memories. Today's students are tomorrow's adults, and many will look back fondly upon favorite sayings, poems, and stories they hear or read in school. So why not include some that deal with the proper responses to failure? For example, Henry Ford once said, "The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing." Thomas Edison described the 10,000 failures he experienced in trying to invent the light bulb this way: "I've learned 10,000 ways that won't work." Coaches often encourage their athletes with an Oliver Goldsmith quotation (frequently misattributed to Vince Lombardi or Confucius): "Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising every time we fail."

3. Share stories. We can't always model the attitudes and behaviors we would like children to adopt, but we can provide these models every day by praising the admirable traits of characters in the stories that are read aloud to and with children.

There are many wonderful stories in which characters struggle with failure but learn from it.

Tallulah's Tap Shoes, by Marilyn Singer and Alexandra Boiger, and *Rosie Revere, Engineer*, by Andrea Beaty and David Roberts, are great for children ages 5-9, while kids in the middle grades will enjoy the novel *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt. 

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