***The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed***

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**INTRODUCTION: HOW I LEARNED TO LET GO**

Over the course of my first decade raising two boys and teaching hundreds of children, I began to feel a creeping sense of unease, a suspicion that something was rotten in the state of my parenting. But it was only when my elder child entered middle school that my worlds collided and the source of the problem became clear to me: today's overprotective, failure-avoidant parenting style has undermined the competence, independence, and academic potential of an entire generation. From my vantage point at the front of the classroom, I’d long viewed myself as part of the solution, a champion of my students’ intellectual and emotional bravery. However, as the same caution and fear I witnessed in my students began to show up in my own children's lives, I had to admit that I was part of the problem, too.

We have taught our kids to fear failure, and in doing so we have blocked the surest and clearest path to their success. That's certainly not what we meant to do, and we did it for all the best and well-intentioned reasons, but it's what we have wrought nevertheless. Out of love and desire to protect our children's self-esteem, we have bulldozed every uncomfortable bump and obstacle out of their way, clearing the manicured path we hoped would lead to success and happiness. Unfortunately, in doing so we have deprived our children of the most important lessons of childhood. The setbacks, mistakes, miscalculations, and failures we have shoved out of our children's way are the very experiences that teach them how to be resourceful, persistent, innovative, and resilient citizens of this world.

I resolved to do what I needed to do to guide both my children and my students back toward the path to competence and independence. The way isn't smooth, and the going certainly isn't easy, but that's kind of the point. We parents are going to have to step back, leave those scary obstacles lying in the road, and allow our children to face them head-on.

As I watched my boys approach their teenage years, something was amiss. They were good, well-adjusted kids, but I couldn't shake the sense that when it came time for them to head out on their own and make their way in the world, they were ill-prepared. As long as they stayed inside the safe haven I'd created for them, they were confident and successful, but when forced to venture outside, would they know how to function? I’d so successfully researched, planned, and constructed their comfortable childhoods that I'd failed to teach them how to adapt to the world on *its* terms.

I am as guilty as the next parent; I have inadvertently extended my children's dependence in order to appropriate their successes as evidence and validation of my parenting. Every time I pack my child's lunch for him or drive his forgotten homework to school, I am rewarded with tangible proof of my conscientious mothering. I love, therefore I provide. I provide, therefore I love. While I know, somewhere in the back of my mind, that my children really should be doing these kinds of tasks for themselves, it makes me feel good to give them these small displays of my deep, unconditional love. My kids will have their entire lives to pack lunches and remember their backpacks, but I only have a very brief window of time to be able to do these things for them.

There's a term for this behavior in psychiatric circles. It's called enmeshment, and it’s not healthy for kids or parents. It’s a maladaptive state of symbiosis that makes for unhappy, resentful parents and “failure to launch” children who move back to their bedrooms after college graduation. In order to raise healthy, happy kids who could begin to build their own adulthood separate from us, we are going to have to extricate our egos from our children's lives and allow them to feel the pride of their own accomplishments as well as the pain of their own failures.

If our children are on the honor roll and make varsity soccer as a freshman, we must be great parents. However, when a child fails a test or receives detention for neglecting to hand in his science paper, *we* must have done something wrong. Parents, after all, are judged by their children's accomplishments rather than their happiness, so when our children failed, we appropriate those failures as our own.

This is not only disastrous for parents’ self-worth; it's short sighted an unimaginative. Failure- from small mistakes to huge miscalculations- is a necessary and critical part of our children's development. Failure is too often characterized as a negative: an F in math or a suspension from school. However, all sorts of disappointments, rejections, corrections, and criticisms are small failures, all opportunities in disguise, valuable gifts misidentified as tragedy. Sadly, when we avoid or dismiss these opportunities, in order to preserve children's sense of ease and short-term happiness, we deprive them of the experiences they need to have in order to become capable, competent adults.

Failure is frightening enough when faced first hand, but when our children wander too close to its jaws, we are overcome with a primal, overpowering need to protect. From an evolutionary perspective, this response makes perfect sense. We are programmed in our hearts and our DNA to shield our children from harm, so when tasked with shepherding our genetic offspring safely to adulthood, we are prepared to fight anything that threatens their success with all the ferocity our nails and teeth and smarts can muster. Unfortunately, when we were all hopped up on adrenaline and cortisol, our brains can't distinguish between genuine, mortal threats to life and limb, and the manageable threat of a soccer opponent flying downfield to steal the ball the way from our child. Leaping in front of an attacking predator on the Savannah and screaming at the referee for a bad call are just “two different manifestations of the same biological trigger.” So when you want to push that little girl who tossed sand in your child's face or punched that teacher who threatened your kid with a D on her science project, remember that while these actions are not sane, socially appropriate response to minor stressors, there genesis comes from our shared biological nature. We all want our children to make it safely to adulthood, and it often feels as if it is all on us to make that happen.

Lacking saber-toothed tigers and precarious cliffs, failure feels like the greatest threat of all, the one danger our children can’t afford to encounter in these times of academic pressure and exclusionary admissions. Yet history is filled with stories of extraordinary people, inventors and innovators, who learned how to appropriate the gifts of failure to their own advantage, who did not run from it, but stayed in its company long enough to become comfortable amid the jumbled wreckage of their dashed hopes and flawed plans. They learned how to salvage what was working while leaving these plans behind only to regroup and rebuild. As recent MacArthur Fellow and former middle school teacher Angela Duckworth has found, the ability to attend to a task and stick to long term goals is the greatest predictor of success, greater than academic achievement, extracurricular involvement, test scores, and IQ. She calls this grit, and first discovered its power in the classroom, while teaching seventh-grade math. She left teaching to pursue research on her hunch, and her findings have changed the way educators perceive student potential. Gritty students succeed, and failure strengthens grit like no other crucible.

Every time we rescue, hover, or otherwise save our children from a challenge, we send a very clear message: that we believe they are incompetent, incapable, and unworthy of our trust. Further, we teach them to be dependent on us and thereby deny them the very education and competence we are put here on this earth to hand down.

But here's the truth, what research has shown over and over again: children whose parents don't allow them to fail are less engaged, *less* enthusiastic about their education, *less* motivated, and ultimately *less* successful than children whose parents support their autonomy.

Decades of studies and hundreds of pages of scientific evidence point to one conclusion that sounds crazy, but it absolutely works: If parents back off the pressure and anxiety over grades and achievement and focus on the bigger picture- a love of learning and independent inquiry- grades will improve and test scores will go up. Children of controlling and directive parents are much less able to deal with intellectual and physical challenges than peers who benefit from parents who stand back and allow their children to try, and fail, and try again. Furthermore, the failure our children experience when we back off and allow them to make their own mistakes is not only a necessary part of learning; it's the very experience that teaches them how to be resilient, capable, creative problem-solvers.

I've struggled to find the best way to support parents in their efforts to love and nurture their children while teaching them how to step back a bit and allow children the safe place they need in order to fail, particularly when those kids hit middle school.

In order to help children make the most of their education, parents must begin to relinquish control and focus on three goals: embracing opportunities to fail, finding ways to learn from that failure, and creating positive home-school relationships.

**PART I Failure: A Most Valuable Parenting Tool**

**CHAPTER 1: HOW FAILURE BECAME A DIRTY WORD**

Nathaniel Branden’s 1969 book, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, kicked the self-esteem movement off with a bang. His message, that self-love is vital to emotional health, and that a person's self-evaluation “is the single most significant key to his behavior,” appealed to parents who sought to assuage their guilt and fill the gaping hole left by their own esteem-filled search for self and career-fueled detachment. The individual, and her sense of self-worth, eclipsed the value of community or family, and the American self-esteem movement took off. Unfortunately, it did not accomplish what Nathaniel Braden hoped. Brayden envisioned a world in which children so valued themselves that the opinions of others would bounce off like some self-esteem forcefield, and we'd all live in a state of blissful self-exploration, self-satisfaction, and self-love.

**A GENERATION OF NARCISSISTS**

That's not quite how it worked out. Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell place the blame for the *Narcissistic Epidemic* squarely on the back of the self-esteem movement. According to Twenge and Campbell, the self-esteem movement may have bolstered American’s self-esteem, but the result is not a happier, healthier citizenry; it is a generation of self-admiring narcissists focused on superficial appearances and personal gain.

The self-esteem movement promised that we could feel good about ourselves in everything we do, that kids would always like their parents, and that we would feel great about our parenting all the time. But this is not how life- let alone effective parenting- works. Children who like their parents all the time are not apt to be children who are corrected when they misbehave, called on for their mistakes, or asked to consider the needs of other people. It does not *feel* good to punish or correct our children; no one wants to be the cause of tears and hurt feelings. It feels wonderful to swoop in and rescue when we take that forgotten homework to school. The catch is that what *feels* good to us isn't always what *is* good for our children.

The lure of short-term happiness and permissive, feel good parenting became even more tempting as we heaped on guilt over increasing divorce rates, more hours spent at work, and less time spent in leisure with our children. Treats traded hands in exchange for the quality time we could not spend with our families. When we did have time for them, we wanted to spend it in relative peace, not in squabbling over rules and consequences. It takes more time to teach a child how to clean a toilet than to clean the toilet ourselves, as is the case with about every worthwhile lesson, and we just did not have that kind of time anymore.

Given that the self-esteem movement is a failure, and doing what feels good has fostered a generation of narcissistic, self-indulgent children unwilling to take risk or cope with consequences, what will work? What parenting practice can help our children acquire the skills, values, and virtues on which a positive sense of self is built?

Parenting for autonomy. Parenting for independence and a sense of self, born out of real competence, not misguided confidence. Parenting for resilience in the face of mistakes and failures. Parenting for what is right and good in the final tally, not for what feels right and good in the moment. Parenting for tomorrow, not just for today.

**CHAPTER 2: WHY PARENTING FOR DEPENDENCE DOESN’T WORK: THE POWER OF INTRINSIC MOTIVATION**

**INTRINSIC MOTIVATION: THE HOLY GRAIL OF PARENTING**

The less we push our kids towards educational success, the more they will learn. The less we use external, or extrinsic, rewards on our children, the more they will engage in their education for the sake and love of learning.

All kids begin life motivated by their own desire to explore, create, and build. When babies take their first step, it is because they are driven to discover and master their environment. If there is any trick to parenting, it is to keep our children from losing that internal drive. Unfortunately, parents and teachers rely on the same sort of reward system used to train monkeys and seals. It works great at the circus, but bananas and herring- or iPads and pizza- do not work for humans. Rewards may get results in the short term, but when it comes to encouraging long-term drive and enthusiasm for learning, rewards are terrible motivators.

When a kid is fascinated by a task, he will be much more likely to persevere, even when he falters, even when the task gets more challenging, and yes, even when he fails to master the task the first time around. Think back to the explorations of your newly mobile baby, crawling around the living room floor, pulling the cat’s tail, and clearing the books off the bottom shelf of the bookcase. My sons drove me crazy, dropping spoons down into the heating vent in the living room and repeatedly attempting to climb the stairs on their own. That same drive that allows kids to learn the name of every god in the Greco-Roman pantheon or the scientific name and genus of every dinosaur that lived during the Crustaceous period fuels their learning early on in school. As kids get older, our goal should be to preserve this natural curiosity and thirst for discovery at all costs. Unfortunately, the methods we use to motivate our children, such as rewards, are in direct conflict with what keeps kids engaged and interested.

Rewards don't work, because humans perceive them as attempts to control behavior, which undermines intrinsic motivation. Human beings are more likely to stick with tasks that arise out of their own free will and personal choice. Given the choice between sticking with a “I have to” task or doing something else, most people would choose anything that is the product of their autonomy and self-determination.

**AUTONOMY: IN WHICH KIDS FIND OUT THAT SELF-RELIANCE FEELS GREAT**

Autonomy and independence are a similar beasts, but their roots reveal a key difference. Independence is the linguistic opposite of dependence, but autonomy is something more. It comes from the Greek *auto*, which means “self,” and *nomos*, which means “custom” or “law,” so to be autonomous, a child has to have internalized a system of rules for living independently. In order to help foster the information of this self-rule, parents have to help kids come up with a system of guiding principles so they will be able to problem-solve and think creatively while remaining rooted in tried-and-true principles of behavior. When parents are over controlling, kids tend not to think about why and how they act in the world. Their choice is to respond to our rules or not. When they are given more control over their worlds out of our sphere of influence, they are more likely to make solid, rule-based decisions. It's a win-win situation for parents, really, because autonomy begets autonomy. As kids realize they have control over their worlds, they want more control over their lives and become more responsible.

While the research on intrinsic motivation shows that attempting to exert control over kids undermines their sense of autonomy, this does *not* mean that we should not make demands for our children. Just the opposite. Children of all ages need limits and guidance from parents and teachers. Without limits, chaos and ensues, and a chaotic classroom or household does not foster learning. I've spent a lot of time in other teachers classrooms, and when those teachers have poor classroom management skills and fail to set expectations for behavior, standards, and character, their students tend to be anxious, confused, and inattentive. In classrooms where teachers establish respect for the educational process and make their expectations clear, students are able to relax and focus on learning.

One way parents and teachers try to impose control over children is to offer rewards: bribes, gifts, money, and yes, even praise in exchange for performance. Applying pressure in the form of control is the single most damaging thing parents and teachers can do to their children’s learning. Whether in the form of threats, bribes, deals, surveillance, and imposed goals, evaluations, or even rewards and praise, control is the enemy of autonomy.

If we really want our kids to invest in long term goals, those goals have to be their goals, not ours. A friend of mine figured this out recently when her son pleaded to stop taking piano lessons. She was finally swayed when he told her, “Mom, I think playing piano is *your* goal, not mine.” This can be hard to keep in mind, particularly when a student is having problems, but for a goal to work, the child has to own it.

**CONNECTION: RELATIONSHIPS ARE WHAT MAKE AUTONOMY AND COMPETENCE MEANINGFUL**

The good news is that autonomy-supportive parenting tends to strengthen bonds between child and parent, while controlling practices weaken them.

In order to foster autonomy while strengthening that connection to your kids, they need to know that you believe they can grow into your new, greater expectations. Here's where the idea of “mindset” comes into the picture. Stanford University psychology professor and *Mindset* author Carol Dweck divides people into one of two mindsets: fixed or growth. A person with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence, talent, or ability are innate, and remain the same throughout life, no matter what he does. A person with a growth mindset, however, believes that these qualities are simply a starting point, that more is always possible through effort and personal development. Those with growth mindsets are motivated to learn for learning's own sake because they believe that by pushing and stretching themselves they can do more and become more accomplished. They thrive on challenge and understand that failing and trying again is part of becoming smarter, better, or faster. If they discover limitations in themselves, they search for ways to overcome these challenges. “The hallmark of successful individuals is that they love learning, they seek challenges, they value effort, and they persist in the face of obstacles,” writes Dweck. To put this research in practical terms, kids with fixed mindsets will be far less likely to persevere when school gets challenging because they don't believe they can stretch beyond their perceived limitations. Kids with growth mindsets will push on even when they fail to understand something the first time around because they know it's a matter of exerting more effort until they succeed.

Sadly, overparenting undermines so much of what contributes to a growth mindset and therefore inhibits intrinsic motivation. Overparenting teaches kids that without our help, they will never be able to surmount challenges. When we save them from risk and failure, we communicate to our kids that we don't have faith in their ability to grow, improve, and surmount challenges, and we encourage a fixed mindset. The sort of dependence created by rescuing and overparenting may feel like connectedness, but because it communicates our lack of faith in them, it undermines healthy connectedness by emphasizing control rather than love and support.

**CHAPTER 3: LESS REALLY IS MORE: PARENTING FOR AUTONOMY AND COMPETENCE**

We all have our own way of doing household chores so there's every possibility that your child may not load the dishwasher precisely as you'd like it done. Unsolicited advice and direction, commonly known as “helping” from the parents perspective or “nagging” from the child's, interferes with her sense of autonomy, conveys a lack of faith in her competence, and, because it's irritating and upsetting to both of you, undermines your connection.

When the child who loaded those food-laden plates into the dishwasher unloads the dishwasher, she will discover that crusty food on the plate, and you will have the opportunity then to explain how to prevent that mistake in the future.

**CONTROLLING PARENTS TAKE OVER**

Sometimes it's just easier to take over, particularly if you are under a time crunch or exhausted. Remember, the goal is for children to learn how to do for themselves, not for the task to get done.

**CONTROLLING PARENTS OFFER EXTRINSIC MOTIVATORS IN EXCHANGE FOR BEHAVIORS**

As long as you keep rewards to a minimum and space them out, it's fine to celebrate or acknowledge in some way a child’s accomplishment on the way to a more autonomous self. But many basic household responsibilities, such as walking the dog or taking out the garbage, should be viewed as part of family maintenance, not as endeavors deserving of hoopla or grand reward. Everyone should contribute to what needs to be done around the house, and rewarding these kinds of basic activities suggests that doing them is heroic as opposed to expected.

**CONTROLLING PARENTS PROVIDE SOLUTIONS OR THE CORRECT ANSWER BEFORE THE CHILD HAS HAD A CHANCE TO REALLY STRUGGLE WITH A PROBLEM**

Not all answers come immediately. Give children time and silence to think. Not only will it teach them to value quiet; it also shows them that you value the process of coming up with the answer itself.

**CONTROLLING PARENTS DON’T LET CHILDREN MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS**

Sometimes it's better to allow your child to experience the ownership and rush of independence that comes from choosing one sport over another or one game over another, and that ownership is often more important than the activity. Decision-making is a complex process that takes a lot of practice, so give your child that opportunity to try on her autonomy for size.

**AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE PARENTS ALLOW FOR MISTAKES AND HELP CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THE CONSEQUENCES OF THOSE MISTAKES**

It can be so hard to keep our sense of humor and patience when there is shattered glass or dirty water all over the kitchen floor, but if we show our kids that mistakes are part of the process of learning, they will be more positive about their abilities and better able to bounce back from mistakes in future attempts. If we teach them that messing up means that world will crumble around them, we only succeed in reinforcing fear of failure.

**CHAPTER 4: ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE SIDELINES: THE REAL CONECTION BETWEEN PRAISE AND SELF-ESTEEM**

Americans are huge fans of praising kids at every turn. But as I dug into the research on praise and motivation, I found that praise is a slippery and tricky parenting tool, one that can lift a kid up or tear him down, depending on how it's used. It can be the best parenting and teaching tool in your toolkit, the kind of encouragement and support that makes kids want to risk failure and reach for greater challenges. Or it can destroy self-esteem. Most recent studies have shown that the worst of the destruction happens in the hearts of kids who already suffer from low self-regard, the very kids we most want to help.

All praise is not equal. “You are a smart kid” is very different from “You worked so hard on that French homework; it must have felt really good to have done well on that assignment.” The first statement makes a judgment, and even if it seems like a positive and loving judgment, it has a negative effect on performance. “You are smart” judges and labels the person, not the product. If I tell my son that he's smart, I'm telling him that I value him for being smart, and he's going to be a lot less likely to try things that might damage his “smart” label, lest he fail, which, in his kid brain, could cause me to withdraw my love and approval. However, if I tell him that I am proud of him for the effort he put into editing the short story he wrote last week, I am reinforcing behavior, not judging him.

Kids who are praised for effort are more likely to have a growth mindset, the understanding that intelligence and capability can be improved with effort. In her book *Parenting Without Borders*: *Surprising Lessons Parents Around the World Can Teach Us*, Christine Gross-Loh Writes that Americans are more prone to a fixed mindset and are drawn to terms such as *talented*, *gifted*, and *prodigy*, and therefore more apt to praise for these inherent qualities. Americans are much more interested in the story of a child who can pick out a Bach concerto on a keyboard at the age of five than a violinist who has put in ten thousand hours of practice in order to rise to first seat in the orchestra.

The research on the harm we do when we create fixed mindsets is best summed up in one of Carol Dweck’s experiments. Dweck and her associates gave several hundred adolescent students ten test questions. After the test, half the students were praised with “Wow, you got [say] eight right. That's a really good score. *You must be smart at this*.” The other half heard, “Wow, you got [say]eight right. That's a really good score. *You must have worked really hard*.” The two groups did about the same on the test before they were praised, but after the praise was lavished, they began to look like two very different groups of kids. The half who received praise for their smarts adopted a fixed mindset. When given a choice between tasks, they rejected the more challenging option in favor of one they could more easily master, thereby keeping their “smart” or “talented” label intact.

Children look to their teachers and parents to help them understand their place in the world, and if we lavish praise for inherent qualities in an attempt to bolster their self-esteem, we do them a huge disservice. Not only are we instilling a fixed mindset; we are planting the seeds of distrust. When a teacher moves around the room, praising each kid, “Great job! You are so smart!” the students figure out pretty quickly that someone is being lied to. They know they can't *all* be geniuses, and they begin to doubt our honesty- or at the very least, our judgment.

Stanford University education professor William Damon describes the damage praise can wreak on children and their trust in our opinion of them: “Even when spawned by the best of intentions, less-than-honest communications to children inevitably create unfortunate complications. One such complication is that, sooner or later, children see through all inaccurate statements about themselves.”

This sentiment was echoed by Lisa Endlich Heffernan, writer of the parenting blog Grown and Flown, and mother of two. She stated, “The single most important thing we have with our kids, beyond our enduring love, is our credibility. By telling kids that they are good at something when they are patently not, we ruin that credibility and do little for their self-esteem as the truth at some point will be revealed. When my kids do not have an aptitude for something, I don't shy away from telling them, but this means that any praise I do give them has that much more value. Our trustworthiness as parents should not be sacrificed on the flimsy altar of a claim.”

Kids who have been taught to pray to that altar and have been overpraised for their smarts and talent are easy to spot in the classroom. They do the bare minimum required to get by; they never take up the gauntlet of challenging extra work and are reluctant to risk saying anything that might be wrong. These students are frustrating to teach because they won't stretch themselves or take any intellectual leaps of faith for fear of not living up to their parents’ expectations and whatever label has been bestowed on them.

Imagine when a kid who has been told that he has a talent for math first sees a complex algebra formula in class and can't understand it. He thinks: “My parents tell me I am smart, but I can't be, not if I can't understand this right away, and I can't let them find out the truth.” This is a terrible bind to put kids in and it drives them underground. They feel terrible about themselves as they suffer through a crisis of confidence and identity, and reject help at the cost of the image they are desperate to keep intact for the sake of their parents’ affection and approval.

In order to understand how praising kids the wrong way can turn them into liars, I turn to professor James M. Lang, author of *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. He writes that we “good-job” kids into a state of overconfidence and an over-inflated sense of their skill level, which can lead to all sorts of negative consequences, such as a tendency to understudy. The ability to judge one's own level of knowledge, skill, or thought process is called metacognition, and it's what allows kids to gauge whether or not they are prepared or knowledgeable on a topic.

Students with good metacognitive skills are more likely to achieve what Lang calls “self-efficacy,” or a belief in their ability to succeed. Not confidence in their ability to succeed, not magical thinking based on parents’ effusive praise, but a belief based on experience and repeated effort in a skill or task. Yet we continue to believe that if we tell our children how wonderful and talented they are by throwing empty platitudes, trophies, and blue ribbons at them, we will bolster performance along with self-esteem. We plaster our car bumpers with stickers, advertising “My Child Is an Honor Student at Springfield Middle School.” Every time your kid glances at that bumper, he is reminded that the thing you value in him is not how hard he works, or how long he sticks with the challenge, but his grades and standardized test results. Recent studies have shown that the very kids we hope to help the most with all this praise, kids with so low self-esteem, are actually the worst off for our efforts, and suffer even lower self-esteem than if we'd just left them alone. Imagine what those kids with low self-esteem could do if their parents and teachers started praising them for their hard work and diligence, hard work that pays off in increased autonomy, competence, and connection. That's the kind of esteem I'd like my students to have, the sort of self-image that's been earned, hard-won, and deserved.

Here are some ideas that can help reorient the way you praise your child, and may just help him adopt a growth mindset and strong sense of self-efficacy:

**PRAISE FOR EFFORT, NOT INHERENT QUALITIES**

Instead of “Great job on that test! You are so smart!” try “Great job on that test! What did you do this time in your preparation that worked so well?” Kids who believe that intelligence grows with effort and diligence will be less distraught about failures, more likely to stick with tasks through those failures, and may even have more fun as they do so.

**ADAPT A GROWTH MINDSET IN YOU LIFE**

When your kids see you stretch yourself, even if you fail in the process, they will be more likely to stretch themselves. Better yet, let them see you continue to stretch yourself after you fail so they will understand that failing at a task does not mean that the person is a failure. You are your child's first and greatest role model, so show him that you are dedicated to the idea that success is tied to effort, not innate talent. Find the thing you believe you cannot do, and give it a shot. Failure and rejection are a part of the learning process, particularly when we but up against our comfort zones, but it's amazing what can happen once we break through that zone and glimpse the possibilities beyond.

**DON’T REINFORCE MALADAPTIVE REACTIONS TO FAILURE**

We all react differently to failure, but some of those reactions are healthier than others and have the potential to teach us more. Denial, for example, tends to exacerbate and prolong failure. Be honest with your children. If your child has failed at something because she did not work hard enough, say so. Teach your child to see the realities of her shortcomings and failures and react accordingly.

**LET YOUR CHILDREN FEEL DISAPPOINTED BY FAILURE**

Sit with the emotions and don't try to jump in and resolve the situation. After all, these are his failures, not yours, and it is unfair and counterproductive to try to make it all better for him. What you were teaching him through your patient silence and inaction on his behalf is that he has the inner strength to move on from failure.

**DO NOT OFFER TO RESCUE YOUR CHILD FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS MISTAKES**

You offer to rescue implies that you don't believe he has the ability to find a solution himself. Help him problem-solve and find lessons in the failure rather than viewing it as a devastating blow to his self-image and confidence. Your goal should be to help him regain a sense of control over the experience of failing. The real learning happens when kids begin to understand how to pick through the wreckage, find the pieces that still work for them, and devise a strategy for future success.

**PART II: Learning From Failure: Teaching Kids To Turn Mistakes Into Success**

**CHAPTER 5: HOUSEHOLD DUTIES: LAUNDRY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COMPETENCE**

One afternoon, I walked into my English classroom and overheard an eighth grader complaining to her friends about how hungry she was. I asked her if she'd forgotten her lunch and she replied, “No, but I hate when my mom packs for me.” Rather than point out the obvious solution- that she should plan and pack her own food- I asked if she could think of any way to solve her unsatisfactory lunch situation.

“I could buy my lunch…?” she offered, ending her sentence in an implied question mark, and looked for my reaction.

“Or…” I prompted.

“…or… I could … Tell my mom what I like, so she can pack stuff I want to eat,” she said more confidently, pleased that she had come up with such a brilliant plan.

“Or…” I repeated.

She was puzzled. What other option could there be? I turned to her classmate, who packed her own lunches.

“Elise, what else could Kate do to make sure she gets exactly the kind of lunch she wants, one that she can't possibly complain about?”

Elise turned pink.

“You could pack your own lunch. That's what I do.”

It was Kate’s turn to blush.

“Oh… yeah. I could do that.”

Children want to feel capable, and we used to let them, before we took the onus of household duties away from them. Instead of teaching our children how to be responsible, reliable members of a family in which children contribute, we do everything for them. Worse, we don't expect competence from them, and when they do give household duties a shot, we swoop in, and we fix.

It's important that my student plans and prepares her own lunch, not because she spoiled or I want her to “toughen up,” but because the failures she will experience when she screws up making that lunch are important. She needs to be disappointed in her own choices once in a while. She needs to find out that when she packs yogurt under the ice pack rather than on top, it gets squished, and the entire lunch bag becomes a sticky, vanilla mess. She needs to know what it feels like to clean that sticky lunch bag and avoid the same mistake next time.

Protecting our kids from failure, from experiencing small disasters and learning how to cope with them, isn't doing them any favors. Whether we overparent and protect out of a need for perfectionism, a desire to show affection, or a need to prove our own parenting excellence, we deny our children the opportunity to be full members of the family with their own duties and responsibilities. We withhold the gift of failure, forgetting that some of our best parenting moments happen in the midst of disaster.

When we exclude our kids from household disasters, we lose an easy opportunity to recover from these failures; household tasks can be daunting at first. We encourage them to be freeloaders and stick with the things they are good at: watching, being waited on, and making them that face of perplexed impatience, hoping an adult will pass by and rescue them from their inability to solve problems.

Children have been deprived of a sense of contribution and purpose for a couple of generations now, and it's time to give it back. Household participation is a first, and I'd argue essential, step toward building a purpose-driven and fulfilling life. Once physicians examine causes of depression and suicidal ideations in adolescents, “lack of purpose” is mentioned over and over in the academic literature as a main factor. Purpose is what saves us all from despair when the details of life become overwhelming or boring, and it is what fuels the determination, resourcefulness, and resolve that will see our children through to their goals.

It's time to grant our kids the opportunity to contribute. Allow them the chance to step up, try, fail, and try again until they get it right.

First, we must expunge the word *chores* from our household vocabulary. Amy McCready, parenting coach and founder of Positive Parenting Solutions, told me, “I've always encouraged parents to ditch the word *chores* and replace it with ‘family contributions.’ Calling them ‘family contributions’ doesn't make kids enjoy them anymore, but it sends an important message about significance, that when you help out, you make a big difference for this family. We all have a hardwired need for significance and this is a great way to foster that in all kids, from toddlers to teens.”

As our children’s first teachers, parents are in the best possible position to teach kids how to focus on goals and face everyday responsibilities and challenges with courage and a good attitude. If we are easily defeated, they will learn to become easily defeated. Children who view obstacles as overwhelming and insurmountable give up on their goals. Kids who have witnessed their parents resolve and resourcefulness, and been allowed to develop great problem-solving skills, don't give up. They get down to the business of using pulleys, levers, and all the other tools at their disposal to move obstacles out of their way and finish the job.

**GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND GENUINE ACCOUNTABILITY**

Set clear expectations and hold your kids accountable when they don't meet those expectations. No bribes or rewards of cash payment- remember, those kinds of short-term incentives can be used to kickstart motivation, but they don't work as a long-term strategy. Besides, the message should not be that one contributes to a family in exchange for money, but that one contributes because one is an integral part of a cooperative unit, a group of people who depend on each other for both labor and love.

**CHAPTER 6: FRIENDSHIPS IN THE MIDDLE YEARS**

As kids move to middle school and high school, the focus shifts from shared interest to social acceptance. Cliques and other exclusionary social situations can be extremely stressful for middle school children, so it will be important to make sure that your child continues to participate in sports, music, and other extracurricular activities that bridge the divide between social groups.

**CHAPTER 7: SPORTS: LOSING AS AN ESSENTIAL CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE**

Sports psychologist Terry Orlick refers to youth sports programs as “failure factories,” and if this is the case, why do we pretend that every one of the 40 million American children who play youth sports should emerge from each game a winner? If kids are inevitably going to face failure and losses in sports programs, why not embrace it? Imagine if sports could be a safe place to fail, or athletes and teams could lose and the aftermath would be all about sportsmanship rather than conflict over that last contested call or doomsday panic about the child's future. Sports should be the place and time to experience disappointment and failure in a lower-stakes environment, a brief window of time to lay down the foundation our children will need in order to grow into adults of character.

**THE BENEFITS OF SPORTS OFF THE FIELD**

Sports also offer parents the gift of time with their children. Most sports participation requires a fair amount of car travel to practices and tournaments, and in my experience, this is where some of the most honest and unguarded conversations with my teenage son take place. So much of parenting is about being there when our kids decide they want to talk to us. I have also found that the more positive and relaxed the atmosphere in the car, the more often kids will seize the opportunity to talk about difficult subjects, topics that are not likely to come up in the usual course of a stressful, task-oriented, and tightly scheduled day. Here is a place to talk about the ups and downs of what happened at the game or at practice, a place to confide in disappointments, exhaustion, passion, or disinterest.

**CHAPTER 8: MIDDLE SCHOOL: PRIME TIME FOR FAILURE**

**THE NAME OF THE GAME IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION**

The elusive skills they will need to survive in high school and life are part and parcel of what psychologists call *executive* function, or the collection of skills and mental processes that allow us to manage our time, resources, and attention in order to achieve a goal. Failure to engage or access executive function skills is what causes most middle school disasters such as late assignments, forgotten homework, and lost textbooks.

While it's tempting to blame executive function deficits on a lack of intelligence, don't go there; they are not related. Executive function skills develop as the adolescent brain develops, and all we can do as teachers and parents is support kids as they learn from their mistakes. Executive function skills develop at different rates, and while some kids acquire them quickly, others continue to have issues well into high school and beyond. It's not coincidental that the students whose parents bail them out, and don't allow them to deal with the consequences of these failures, develop these skills more slowly. The key to helping kids create the systems they need to gain executive function is to let them fail, let them feel the pain and inconvenience of their mistakes, and then support them in their efforts to rework the bugs. Try, fail, suffer a little more, remedy, try again. Over and over again until they learn. Every intervention or rescue is a lesson lost. They need every minute, every learning opportunity inherent in their failures we can grant them before they face the much greater challenges and consequences that await them right around the corner in high school.

**CHAPTER 9: HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND: TOWARD REAL INDEPENDENCE**

Mothers and fathers are accompanying children to college, job interviews, and salary negotiations. As a *Journal of Adolescence* noted recently, “Attempts at [parental] control are linked to negative child outcomes in emerging adulthood.” The authors conclude, “It would seem that emerging adults should be personally invested in their own growth and development by solving their own problems with roommates, making their own decisions about employment, and seeking their own help from professors. By not doing so, emerging adults may be robbing themselves of the experiences and practice necessary to develop skills that are essential to success in marriage, careers and social interactions.

In other words, until we step back and allow teenagers to live their own lives, surviving their own failures and earning their own triumphs, they won't get a chance to experience their own sense of competence, competence they will need in order to be successful in their jobs, families, and yes, even their marriages.

When I talk to parents about giving kids the room to fail in high school, they claim they want to, but can't. It's just impossible these days, they argue. The stakes have gotten too high: “It's so intense, and every grade matters!” and “I can't let [my son] fail because he only gets one shot at high school, and there's too much to lose.” These parents argue that even one failure could spell the end of a scholarship opportunity, the loss of honor roll, the unerasable record of detention, academic probation, or suspension. Yes, I nod, that's true, but the greatest risk lies in sheltering and protecting kids from failures while they still are living at home, because failures that happen out there, in the real world, carry far higher stakes.

**Part III- Succeeding at School: Learning from Failure Is a Team Effort**

**CHAPTER 10: PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS**

**FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE**

Teachers receive daily complaints, but it's rare to hear feedback about the successes. I'm not suggesting that you invent praise or compliments out of thin air, but when things are going smoothly, or if your child is talking about something she's excited about in school, thank her teacher. Better yet, write a thank-you note. I guarantee that note will either get tacked to the wall of the teacher’s office or tucked in a special folder she keeps in her desk drawer. I have one of those folders in my desk drawer, and I've carried some of the notes inside it with me since my very first teaching job. The value of thank-you cannot be overstated, and the practice of expressing gratitude is a great lesson to model for your kids.

In an age where email, text, and tweets dominate our lives, a proper thank-you note is a true gift. In order to feel connected, we all need to feel appreciated, and children should learn how to convey appreciation from a young age.

**REMEMBER THAT TRUTH OFTEN LIES BETWEEN TWO PERCEPTIONS**

I trust my children, and yet I am aware that the truth is slippery, a subjective and elusive beast. Truth is subject to human frailty and flaws in perception, and this applies to even the most trustworthy and honest children. If you approach your child’s teacher or another parent with the assertion that your child is completely free of fault, you are going to lose credibility before you've even begun to advocate for your child. Keep an open mind and hope others will do the same.

**IF YOU ARE CONCERNED WITH A TEACHER’S ACTIONS, TALK TO THAT TEACHER**

Resist the temptation to go over the teachers head to the principal, at least at first. The principal is put in an impossible position when a parent goes straight to the administration, because the principal is forced to respond in some way, and it's highly unlikely she was present for whatever altercation or conflict took place. Make an appointment to talk to the teacher sooner, rather than later, because as time passes, resentments mount, details fall away in memory, and the opportunity to make things right is lost.

**CHAPTER 11: HOW TO HELP WITHOUT TAKING OVER**

Homework comes in many forms- from practice to preparation, from useless to useful, from engaging to downright torturous. Whatever form it takes, and regardless of where you stand on the topic of homework’s purpose and utility, homework as your child’sjob, not yours. *Your* job is to support, encourage, and redirect your children when they are young, and as they get older, to make your expectations clear and get the heck out of their way.

Yes, yes, I know; easier said than done. It's easy to stand back and give your child autonomy when homework is a simple math facts review or when long-term assignments remain safely in the distant future. However, when the whining and the complaints of “But I don't *want* to do homework!” and “It’s too hard!” rise to a shriek, it is tempting to take over or simply divulge the correct answers so the torture can end and family members can get on with their lives. Don't succumb. These stressful moments, when your child's frustration levels are high, harbor the most valuable opportunities to foster diligence, perseverance, and grit in your child. Kids learn the most about sticking with the task when it's hard, when they are sure they will never figure something out, or when they are suffering the consequences of their own procrastination or botched planning. Even more important, homework that's challenging is more valuable from a learning perspective than easy homework, so stick to your guns. Be strong.

It may seem harmless to step in, but the damage is cumulative. Every time you take over, and rescue your child from working out a challenging math problem or thesis statement on her own, you undermine your child's sense of confidence, and autonomy. Completing the task herself is its own incentive, a reward infinitely more important than grades or test scores.

When the homework session is at an end, remember the lessons of Carol Dweck and the growth mindset. Praise your child for the effort he puts into his assignments, particularly when he encountered those frustrating difficulties that pushed him to the limits of what he thought he could do. Make sure he knows that you value his persistence as much as, if not more than, you value the answers he wrote after each problem. Whenever possible, reiterate the concept that the harder we work, and the more we stretch our brains, the smarter we become.

Once your child is in middle and high school and those executive functions have started to kick in, it’s time to remove yourself from your child's homework duties.

**CHAPTER 12: THE REAL VALUE OF A LOW SCORE**

I'm going to point out the gigantic elephant standing in the middle of this chapter right away. Grades. There's no way around this unfortunate reality, so I'm just going to face it head-on. Grades are extrinsic rewards for academic performance. Extrinsic rewards undermine motivation and long-term learning. Therefore, grades undermine motivation and long-term learning. There. Elephant identified. I'd love to remove the elephant from the room altogether and replace it with something less unwieldly and more attractive, but as our system of education is currently based on the exchange of grades for performance, I have no choice but to talk about how to retrain our brains and our children to look past the beast and see the other, more meaningful rewards that grades obscure.

Over the years, my students have shared their many frustrations with grades and the impact they have on learning and motivation with me in conversations, and more often, in essays and journaling exercises.

Students are not the only ones acknowledging the detrimental effect of grading. Teachers are increasingly writing and talking about the harm grading does to their students’ learning and the fragile student-teacher bond. High school English teacher K.C. Potts repeats some version of the following speech to his students at the beginning of each school year:

“I will say many times that grades are the worst thing that ever happened to learning, and until you find a way to establish a healthy relationship with them, they will torment and frustrate you, have you worried and stressed-out, will make you sometimes feel not so good about yourself. Of course, you are better at some things than you are at others. One of education's tasks is to help you recognize your strengths and weaknesses. Try to avoid the compare game whereby you judge your performance by comparing it to that of others. Doing so is both inevitable and counterproductive. The issue is not what others can do but what *you* can do.

Many of you aspire to high grades because you see them as a ticket to the college of your choice. And yes, grades do matter. But are they an indication of what you can do? The better motivation: learning how to do something well. Getting an “A” measures that the student “knows how to play the game of school.” It does NOT always, as practiced, demonstrate real mastery of material.”

**KEEP GRADES IN THEIR PROPER PERSPECTIVE**

Grades are not a measure of our children’s worth, and often they are not even an accurate measure of their ability. Teachers know this, but even we fall into the trap of equating our students with their grades. While grades can be a measure of ability, more often they are a measure of the skills that make for successful students: solid executive function skills, compliance, willingness to please, ability to follow directions, and self-discipline. When I listen in on students as they debate the merit of grades, it's clear that kids understand this reality. If you catch an honest and forthcoming teacher at the right moment, she may even reveal that she knows it, too. Grades, for all the weight they carry in our culture, are less important than learning. Learning is the key to understanding our world, and the universe beyond; to communicating with other people, and to innovating for the future of our society. Grades are the key to certain academic institutions and a few office doors. I'd prefer my children and my students to value the former rather than the latter.