



Raising a Child that Knows how to Fail Gracefully

Knowing how to recover from life's setbacks is a skill that can be taught. As an Educational Therapist, I've found that "grit" or, more frequently, the lack of grit is a key predictor of a student's ability to learn. Grit is resilience; the ability to not let a setback destroy you, the ability to learn a lesson and move on from what might be perceived as a failure.

The Gift of Failure, by Jessica Lahey addresses the trend where well-meaning parents swooping in to shield their children from failure. In the process, they also shield them from important life lessons that failure teaches. Whether it is on the soccer field or participating in the school play, the author makes the point that students are becoming increasingly uncomfortable taking risks. However, a well-lived life needs both risks and failures. It is through mistakes that tremendous life lessons are learned. Educational Therapists speak of the Confidence – Competence cycle which is based on the idea that when a child tries something more difficult than he thinks he can do; he builds self-esteem and realizes that he is able to do more than he thought he could do. Confidence is built in the small success of overcoming perceived failure.

Columbia University's Teachers College has created the Education for Persistence and Innovation Center which is dedicated to studying the role that failure plays in success and innovation. One study produced by the center shows that students in low-income high schools had their science scores rise after studying the life of Marie Curie and her continuous struggles and setbacks. Students benefit from real life examples of how overcoming failure leads to greater success in the long run. Thomas Edison is the quintessential American example of trying repeatedly. It is Edison who reportedly said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Teachers today frequently receive projects from students in early elementary grades that are perfect – typed and professionally printed. Children need to learn how to lay out their ideas on poster boards, learn to use a ruler, and learn that planning skills are crucial to the outcomes. When parents take control, the unintended consequence is that the child not only doesn't learn the skills to succeed the next time, but the child also perceives that Mom and Dad don't think she can do it. What the child actually learns is that he needs his parents to accomplish his work.

Playground time and sports teams can also offer valuable life lessons if the parents learn to stay on the sidelines. Let the coaches coach your child. You be the source of transportation and encouragement. In the last few years, the news has carried numerous stories of overly

aggressive parents being ejected from games, getting into brawls and worse, all in attempts to protect a child or “ease” a losing situation. The children are watching, and the lessons being learned are not those intended. Children need to lose even when they try hard. Don’t let your child win at a board game. That decreases the fun for everyone. Instead, teach them skills to help them win the next time.

Help your child name the emotions involved in losing. “Wow, you must feel down right now.” Words such as these signal to your child that you understand and validate his feelings. Kids want to be taken seriously. How parents react to failure sets an example for their child. Above all, don’t make excuses. Telling a child that the referee was blind or that as a child you were bad in math too doesn’t help. Without realizing it seemingly innocent words can set boundaries that limit what a child believes is her intelligence limit. Removing the simple words “...no good...” is a simple yet effective strategy to help children gain confidence after any failed attempt.

Being your child’s role model means that they need to see the parent’s failures and how they handle them as well as the successes. In a child’s eyes, the parent is infallible. Tell them when you fail to close a deal or get a parking ticket. Explaining how you erred and how you are going to work harder or smarter or play by the rules are all valuable lessons that make you more accessible to your child.

As we age, we gravitate towards skills and hobbies where we excel. Children need to try a wide range of topics and skills before settling into a routine that is narrowly focused on only one or two. If your child is a video game maven, nudge him to try something totally different. Help him remember he did not become excellent at video gaming in the first few tries. New skills take time to develop.

Resilience is a skill that can be taught through life lessons, attentive parentings, and exposure to numerous opportunities to both succeed and to fail.

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Parenting in the Real World – Stephanie O’Leary, PsyD

Enough as She Is: How to Help Girls Move Beyond Impossible Standards of Success to Live Healthy Happy, and Fulfilling Lives – Rachel Simmons

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/true-grit-measure-teach-success-vicki-davis>