

When You Should Let Your Child Fail: The Benefits of Natural Consequences

By James Lehman

Sometimes you have to let your child fail. Parents often do their kids a disservice when they protect them from natural consequences when they take over for their kids to ensure that their kids don't fail.

While it's natural for parents to worry about failure, there are times when it can be productive for kids—and a chance for kids to change for the better.

“Failure is an opportunity to get your child to look at himself.”

But watching your child fail makes you feel helpless, angry, and sad. You worry about everything from your child's self-esteem and social development to their future success.

In counselling sessions, parents would frequently tell me that they fear their child will fail in life. When I ask them what specifically they're afraid of, usually, it's school-related.

They are afraid their child will fail a class or get bad grades. They think that once their child is **failing in school**, they will fall behind and won't be able to catch up.

For many parents, this is a crisis. And I understand that.

When a Crisis is an Opportunity

I want to talk about the word, *crisis* for a minute. The Chinese symbol for crisis is a combination of the symbols for *danger* and *opportunity*. Yes, a crisis presents danger, but it also presents opportunity.

In a crisis, parents see the danger part very clearly, but often don't see the opportunity part. They don't see that their child has the opportunity to learn an important lesson. The lesson might be about the true cost of cutting corners, what happens when he doesn't do his best at something, or the real consequences for not being productive.

The crisis might also be a chance for your child to learn the cost of misleading and lying to his parents about how much work he's actually done or what grades he's receiving.

Don't Be a Martyr for Your Child

Many of the parents I've worked with are uncomfortable taking the approach of letting their child fail. Therefore, instead of allowing their child to fail, they may try to get the teacher to change the grade. Or they may do the work for their child.

But sadly, what their child learns is that they don't have to take responsibility for their ineffective behavior. They learn that somebody else is going to fight for them.

These parents are playing what I call the *martyr* parenting role.

Martyr parents are overly anxious when their children feel any discomfort or distress. And, to cope with their own anxiety, martyr parents will do whatever it takes to eliminate their child's distress. In the process, these parents rob their kids of the opportunity to learn coping skills.

Don't Shield Your Child from Natural Consequences

If your child chooses not to study enough and gets a failing grade, that's the natural consequence of her behaviour. And she should experience the discomfort that results from her behaviour.

Let me be clear: when you try to change the actions of people around your child so she doesn't face the natural consequences of her actions, she learns the wrong lesson. She learns that if she screws up

enough, Mom and Dad will take care of her. She learns that Mom and Dad will handle the teacher for her.

And, to make matters worse, she's doesn't learn the math or the science or whatever it is she's been avoiding.

The Perils of Using Power to Solve Problems

When Mom and Dad get the teacher to change a grade, your child learns that power can solve his problems. He learns that power can be a substitute for responsibility, and that power trumps responsibility. That's not a good lesson.

In fact, he learns that the power of being manipulative and threatening is more valuable than actually being accountable and doing his work competently.

But in the real world—in the adult world—real power comes from taking responsibility for one's actions, not avoiding them.

“But the School is Being Unfair”

Many parents have reasons to justify their defence of their child. They may cite the unfairness of the school system, their child's learning difficulties, the principal's attitude, or the prior history of their child at the school.

I understand that those things can be very real. It may be easier to fight with the teacher than it is to fight with your child. It may be easier to change the teacher—or even the school rules—than to get your child to change.

But if your child didn't do his homework, ignored a project that was due, or lied and misled you or his teacher, the fact remains that it's his responsibility to experience the natural consequences of his actions. And the biggest consequence is that your child has failed.

Failure is Not the End of the World

Failure is not the end of the world. It's a lesson. It's a gauge of how she's doing. And it's designed to help her see that she's not making the grade. If she's failed something, she needs to solve the problem responsibly.

Confront the Lying

I need to say a word about lying. **If your child is lying** or being dishonest about doing his homework, you should ask yourself what else is he being dishonest about.

When he's supposed to be studying after school, what is he really doing? This raises important questions because we know if somebody is sneaky in one area, they may be sneaky in other areas. You need to investigate and open your eyes to the possibility that something else might be going on.

Solve the Problem by Addressing the Problem

I believe if your child fails a subject or even fails the year, and if you're addressing the problem, then you're starting to solve the problem.

Failure is an opportunity to get your child to look at himself and make some changes.

Part of parents' sensitivity to this is that if their child fails, they feel like they've failed, too. And parents don't want to feel like they've failed. I understand that.

I know that it's tough to be a parent who works hard to raise a child, only to have that child fail. You ask yourself, “What more can I do?”

But that's the wrong question. The question should be, "What more can my child do?"

So, instead of asking, "What am I not doing as a parent?" Ask, "What is my child not doing as a student?"

Once you present the problem in those terms, you can begin to create effective change.

Feeling Discomfort Is OK

When we talk about failure and what your child can learn from it, we're really talking about the benefits of allowing your child to feel discomfort. And when I say discomfort, I mean worry, fear, disappointment, and the experience of having consequences for your actions.

I think that most parents really don't want their kids to feel uncomfortable about anything, even when they know that sometimes it's beneficial for their child to pay the price for their choices. And so some parents will fight with the school, they will fight with other parents, they will fight with their kids. Ultimately, they will fight with anybody or anything to claim their child's right never to feel uncomfortable.

Somehow in our culture, protecting our kids from discomfort—and the pain of disappointment—has become associated with effective parenting. The idea seems to be that if your child suffers any discomfort or the normal pain associated with growing up, there's something you're not doing as a parent. Or that somehow your child is a victim.

Personally, I think that's a dangerous trap for parents to fall into. While I don't think situations should be sought out to make a child uncomfortable, I do think if that a child is uncomfortable because of some natural situation or consequence, you should not interfere.

Look at it this way: when a child is feeling upset, frustrated, angry, or sad, they're in a position to develop some important coping skills.

For example, they learn how to prevent a situation from happening again. So, if your child doesn't do his homework and then is embarrassed because he is called on in class and doesn't know an answer, then he should learn to do his homework next time in order to avoid future embarrassment. Remember, the problem isn't that he feels embarrassed, the problem is that he isn't doing his homework.

Kids Need to Build Up a Tolerance for Discomfort

Kids need to build up a tolerance for discomfort, an emotional callous if you will. Building this tolerance for discomfort is important because discomfort is a big part of life. We have to learn to sit in traffic, to lose a game, or to get passed over for a promotion. Life is naturally full of failures, even for the most successful people.

Your child needs to be able to learn how to manage these situations in order to develop a tolerance for them. And make no mistake, if he doesn't learn to tolerate discomfort, he's going to be a very frustrated adolescent and adult.

So I advise parents to let your kid wait in line—don't try to figure out how to cut ahead. When your child is starting to get frustrated, point it out. You can say:

"Yeah, I know it's frustrating to wait, but this is the way we have to do it."

Entitled Kids

When you shield your child from discomfort, he learns that he should never have to feel anything unpleasant in life. As a result, he develops a **false sense of entitlement**.

He learns that he doesn't have to be prepared in school, because his parents will complain to the teacher, who will stop calling on him or expecting his homework to be in on time.

He learns that his parents will raise their tolerance for deviance. And his teacher will expect less of him because of his parents' intervention.

Ultimately, he learns to confront a problem with power rather than dealing with it through responsibility and acceptance.

How to Talk to Your Child About Failing

As a parent, you want to coach your child to better deal with natural consequences and failures. Calm and thoughtful coaching can put her in a better position to learn the lessons of failure. It's just like in sports, where the coach teaches the team how to respond constructively to a loss so that the team has a better chance to win next time.

When things are calm for both you and your child, I recommend focusing the conversation on having your child address three key questions: (1) "What part did you play in this?"; (2) "What are you going to do differently next time."; and (3) "What did you learn from this?"

1. "What part did you play in this?"

You want your child to learn what part he played in the failure because, after all, he can only change his part. The lesson begins with identifying his part.

Your child might say, "I don't know what part I played, Dad." You can respond by saying:

"Well, let's think about it. Where did you get off track? Where did things go wrong for you?"

If your child doesn't know, you can say:

"Well, it seems to me you got off track when you didn't have your homework ready when your teacher called on you. The part you played was not being prepared. And the solution to that is getting prepared."

Your child may agree with you, or he may try to offer some defense. But any defense that's offered is not going to be legitimate as long as you're speaking in the context of "What part did you play?" You just need to point out what really happened. You may have to say one or more of the following:

"Well, it seems to me like you're making an excuse for not having your homework done."

"Seems to me you're blaming me for not having your homework done."

"It looks to me like you're blaming your teacher for not having your homework done."

Be aware that your child may blame the teacher. And you may agree that the teacher is a problem. I realize that there are both effective and ineffective teachers.

But consider this: when is your child going to learn to deal with ineffective teachers? Where do you think your child is going to learn to deal with injustice or unfair bosses?

2. "What are you going to do differently next time?"

Your child needs to have a plan for what to do differently next time. Say to your child:

"What are you going to do differently the next time when you have to do your homework?"

Or:

"What are you going to do differently next time so that if your teacher calls on you, you won't get embarrassed?"

Or:

“What are you going to do differently next time to pass the test?”

This is a big question in this conversation with your child because it gets him to see other, healthier ways of responding to the problem.

3. *“What did you learn from this?”*

Work with your child to help ensure he learns the right lesson. Say:

“What did you learn from being embarrassed when your teacher called on you?”

“What did you learn from not passing the test?”

Let him know that failing is part of the learning process at times. Failing may be a problem, but failing to learn from failure is a much bigger problem.

Conclusion

Part of learning—for everyone—involves feeling uncomfortable at times. Part of loving your child responsibly means that you need to let him feel discomfort, and even fail, as long as he’s learning how to be accountable for his actions in the process. And try to appreciate the opportunity that a crisis and its natural consequences present to your child.

About the author

James Leham is from Empowering Parents, a company dedicated to empowering parents with the tools to manage the most challenging behaviour problems in children ages 5 to 25.