

9 Reasons It Is Hard to Let Kids Fail (and How a Butterfly Can Help)

"Let your child fail!" seems to be a common theme of parents education these days. This blog included; educators across the nation urge parents to let their child fail.

And if you are a parent, the very use of the word "fail" next to the phrase "your child" probably takes your breath away at least a little bit.

Let's face it. No one wants to see their child fail. Character building or not, an alarm rings when our kids are in distress (or potential distress) because of a failure.

So, despite knowing that we need to let our kids fail, our evolutionary instinct kicks in, and we are not just simply running to their aid but are also trying to fix their problems and mistakes.

Sure, it's easy to dismiss us as: helicopter parents (always hovering), snowplow parents (always clearing the path) or bubble-wrap parents (always wrapping up our precious kids to ensure no harm comes their way). And most of us probably are guilty of this sort of behavior at least occasionally. I know I am, and I talk and write about this stuff all the time!

Does that make me a hypocrite? Maybe. I also just think it makes me human.

So why? Why do we parents hastily jump in as soon as our parent alarm rings and try to save the day?

Here are a few reasons (okay, fine, nine) that I have been guilty of (and can remember):

1. I worry that when they fail it means they will feel pain. Here's the thing: they probably will. No one gets through life without some pain, even our babies. Our hearts get broken. We work hard and still don't get the reward. We think we are great at something only to discover we are not. Of course, as parents we want to help ensure that the pain our children encounter is not life ending, we need to let them experience it so that they can see that they can bounce back. This gift, the gift of resilience, is what will allow them to know that while pain is inevitable that they have the tools to rise to fight another day.

2. I worry that when they fail it means that they will want to quit. No one wants to raise a quitter. And, there are times that failure will bring out the desire to abandon a path that they once were on. But instead of panicking that failure will turn your children into quitters, seize the opportunity to teach them to make the hard choice to persevere through the difficult time. Show them support instead of shielding them. And recognize that it is difficult for you when your child changes paths.

3. I worry that when they fail it means they will develop low self-esteem. Failure is not what develops low self-esteem. Sure, we are likely to feel sad after a failure. But low self-esteem is developed in how those we love react to our failures and the belief in our power to overcome adversity. If the people who are supposed to love and support us are disappointed in us as people because of our failure, that puts a chink in our self-esteem. Furthermore, I believe the largest damage to our self-esteem occurs when we feel powerless to rebound from it because we don't have coping mechanisms. Hold your kids in high regard no matter their accomplishments and teach them how to cope.

4. I worry that when they fail it means that they will not be successful. If failure is indicative of never succeeding, there would be zero scientific inventions. Failure is part of learning. But, even so, even if failure might mean that your child won't be successful at this one measure, it does not mean that they won't lead a successful life. No one is great at everything—an important lesson of life.

5. I worry that when they fail it means they have a poor work ethic. Maybe your child did try, and this is the result. Or maybe they didn't put in the effort, so you are partly right: poor work ethic on this attempt. Or even in this area. But it does not mean your child has a universal poor work ethic. Remember: No one can give 100% all the time in everything they do. We are humans, not machines.

6. I worry that when they fail it means others will think that we are bad parents. Sadly, in far too many communities judging other parents' parenting skills is a pastime. So you are correct: there may be some parents who judge you because your child struggles. Let it go. In 20 years (or hopefully more like 20 minutes) they won't be in your life. Hopefully, your child will be. Worry more about your child and less about the opinion of others.

7. I worry that when they fail it means we are bad parents. Besides other's evaluations of our parenting, way too many people who are excellent parents worry that they are doing a good job. Or, as a wise person told me, "if you are worried that you are a bad parent, you most likely are a good one as you are bothering to worry to begin with." Besides, our kids are not products that we lead through some magical set of prescribed steps to churn out perfectly formed citizens. They are human beings with strengths and weakness and as such are flawed and yet still wholly deserving of our love.

8. I worry that when they fail it means we need to critique their performance so they can improve. Or how else will we make sure they do better next time? Not so fast. It isn't always our job to be the critic in our children's lives. Yes, even when we are providing loving feedback. It is sometimes our children's responsibility to reflect on what went wrong, developing his or her internal

mechanism of self-evaluation. We can be there to ask the right questions and be a sounding board, but it is not our job to tell them what they did wrong.

9. I worry that when they fail it means I have then in the wrong environment. A "D" doesn't mean the teacher is no good or a poor season that the coach is inadequate. Yes, sometimes the environment is the issue, but not nearly as often as we think it to be. In a panic, we phone the principal or another club when we would be better served to calm down first before pulling such triggers. Our children's failures are not always the fault of another.

So what are we to do when our children fail? Be there for them. Wait and see what their reaction is and respond to them accordingly. It could be that they are perfectly content not making the all-star team or that they are not devastated that Fancy Pants University said no. Maybe they were concerned more with your reaction than their own.

And if they are devastated? Show them empathy. Hug them. Listen to them without interrupting. Tell them you love them. Let them get their emotions out before you move to solutions. Refrain from making excuses for them or just blanketing it with a trite "it will be okay." It will be okay. You know that. Hopefully somewhere deep down they do too. But for right now just listen and show unconditional love. And when the emotional storm passes, you may find yourself in a position to help your child think. To consider what lessons were learned, what can be done differently next time and what action steps might be most appropriate to move on. Or, maybe your work is done, and your child will move onto that step alone.

There is a wise analogy in parenting that I hold tight to in my moments of wanting to jump in and just fix things for one of my kids. It's that of the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. After the metamorphosis is complete, the newly formed butterfly must struggle to burst free of the cocoon. It is in that process that the blood flows to the butterfly's wings so it may fly. If one was to help the butterfly free itself by cutting open the cocoon the butterfly would be unable to take flight and would die.

It is the struggle that gives the butterfly wings.

Kind of cool analogy, right?

There is a beautiful saying by Hodding Carter: "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings." Unconditional love is the roots. Empathy and self-discovery provide the wings.

Even as my youngest gets ready to go off to college, I have to remind myself to ground my helicopter, park the snow plow and put down the bubble wrap. Yes, it's hard to let your kids fail, but it one of the best gifts you can give them.

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