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12 HUGE MISTAKES PARENTS CAN AVOID

LEADING YOUR KIDS
TO SUCCEED IN LIFE

TIM ELMORE

We Won't Let Them Fail

When my son, Jonathan, was very young, we did what many dads and sons do. We played whiffle ball out in our yard. Jonathan has a number of talents, but we soon discovered baseball is not one. He may be the next Steve Jobs or Walt Disney, but he was no Josh Hamilton or Derek Jeter when it came to hitting a ball. So I found myself making it easier and easier. I got closer to him and threw the ball slower to ensure he'd finally succeed. After some time, he finally hit it. (I wondered if I might have to go inside and shave again it took so long.) I'm pretty sure it was an accident.

We both celebrated the hit, and then he wanted to try some more. Since we had a good thing going, I didn't want him to fail. So I made it impossible for him to fail. I made hitting the ball so easy, it might as well have been a T-ball.

That season, we signed him up to play T-ball. It was a comedy. He stood in the outfield, staring at his mitt or at the sky, his imagination wandering through space—even when a ball was hit to him. It just wasn't his thing. Yet I didn't want him to fail at this game I loved so much, so I just kept making it easier and easier.

It finally caught up with me—and with him. All the extra steps I took to make it impossible for him to fail were appropriate when he was four or five years old. They were not appropriate as he moved into the fourth grade. I discovered I'd given him some unrealistic expectations and false assumptions by not allowing him to experience life as it really was. He thought he was good at baseball—and drew laughter

from classmates when they actually saw him play. It was then we had a heart-to-heart talk.

I'll be the first to admit this was not the end of the world. It is, however, a picture of how I learned to correct a mistake. Every parent and teacher wants to see their kids succeed in school, in sports, and in life, but making it impossible to fail isn't the answer. Removing failure, in fact, is a terrific way to stunt maturity. A recent survey of young MBA students revealed that Generation iY (those born after 1990) is actually begging adults to let them explore and fail. A top response from the survey said they want to *learn to fail—quickly*. Waiting on this lesson makes it harder.

We Fail When We Don't Let Them Fail

Far too often, adults intuitively feel we will ruin our children's self-esteem if we let them fail. They need to feel special—to believe they are winners—and we assume this means we can't let them fail. Actually, the opposite is true. Genuine, healthy self-esteem develops when caring adults identify children's strengths but also allow them the satisfaction that comes only from trying and failing. Effort, failure, and eventual triumph builds great emerging adults. Unfortunately, for too long we've failed them.

- As parents, we've given them lots of possessions but not much perspective.
- As educators, we've given them plenty of schools but not plenty of skills.
- As coaches, we've taught them how to win games but not how to win in life.
- As youth workers, we provide lots of explanations but not enough experiences.
- As employers, we've mentored them in profit and loss but haven't shown them how to profit from loss.

It's time our leadership caught up with their needs. Kids are growing

up in a very different world from the one we grew up in. Teachers, coaches, and parents have changed the way they approach leading students. Some of these changes are great, but some have had unintended consequences.

Why Adults Won't Let Kids Fail

The shift seems to have started more than 30 years ago with the Tylenol scare in September 1982. Do you remember that? Bottles of Tylenol had been poisoned and were removed from drugstore shelves everywhere. The next month, as kids trick-or-treated at strangers' homes, adults seemed to rise up, launch hotlines, and determine we would safeguard our kids from harm. In the years following this incident, it was as though America turned her attention to the children.

Safety wasn't the only issue. By the 1990s, we had determined to boost self-esteem and ensure kids grew up confident and comfortable in this very uncertain world. Diaper-changing tables in public restrooms now signal that these kids are a top priority. Baby on Board signs on minivans in the 1990s led to bumper stickers that read My Kid Is a Super Kid, or My Kid Made the Honor Roll. When they play soccer or Little League baseball, every kid gets a trophy, win or lose, just for being on the team. Kids' bedrooms are lined with ribbons and awards, and they've never won a championship.

Next, we determined to give our kids a head start in everything they did. We came to believe that all caring parents should use Baby Einstein and Baby Mozart with their young children. We wanted to give our kids a decided advantage, an edge on their peers, because ours are so special. I agree with promoting self-esteem, assuring safety, applauding participation, and providing head starts, but I believe we've given kids a false sense of reality. We've set them up for a painful wake-up call as they grow older. Social scientists agree that our emphasis on winning has produced highly confident kids. Sadly, they also agree that this ill-prepares them for the world that awaits them.

Think about the unintended consequences of these changes I've described. Many middle-class kids have never experienced significant setbacks. And often they are unprepared to navigate them as they reach

their twenties. For example, in the past, when a student got in trouble or failed a class, parents reinforced the teacher's grade and insisted their children study harder. The children learned, *I failed, but the adults around me believe I can get back up, try again, and succeed.* When that same situation occurs today, parents often side with their children, and the teacher gets in trouble. The child learns, *I will soon be out of this mess because the adults around me will make excuses and not let me fail.*

Hmm...why do we do this? Let me suggest one reason. Moms and dads frequently turn their children into their trophies. They see their children as reflections of their own success. Every kid is a winner so Mom and Dad can be winners too. We look better. There's no mess.

And parents are not the only culprits. Educators have done the same thing. We pass kids on to the next grade even if they're not really ready for it. We graduate them even if they didn't legitimately pass a class so our school can get the federal funding we deserve. In colleges, pushing students toward a degree helps the statistics on retention and graduation. Once again, we see our students as reflections of us and our achievements. This is poor preparation for their future.

Recently, a school district superintendent asked me for some advice on handling a situation he'd never faced before. He told me some of his schools were no longer using red ink to grade papers. Why? It was too harsh for the students. It caused too much stress. Two high schools wanted to do away with grades and class levels all together. They felt it was damaging to have distinctions like freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Parents and teachers suggested some of the teens who were 18 but still sophomores felt belittled and behind.

Have we forgotten this is not how life works after childhood? I hate to see students discouraged, but removing the opportunity to fail is not the solution. These kids feel behind because they *are* behind. Perhaps the best motivation to get them moving is to equip them to face reality with tenacity. What they need most are adults who actually believe they can do it—and who provide support and accountability until they do. Sooner or later, they'll have to perform.

This belief that we cannot let kids fail has gone international. A few years ago, the Professional Association of Teachers in England suggested

even the thought of failure was damaging to students. Liz Beattie, a retired teacher, called on the association's annual gathering in Buxton, Derbyshire, to "delete the word 'fail' from the educational vocabulary, to be replaced with the concept of 'deferred success.'" Again, I have to wonder if this is genuinely helpful or if adults are simply in denial.

The good news is, not everyone is buying it, including United Kingdom Education Secretary Ruth Kelly.

For that particular proposal, I think I'd give them 0 out of 10. It's really important for young people to grow up with the ability to get on and achieve, but also to find out what failure is. When young people grow up and enter the adult world, they have to deal with success and failure, and education is about creating well-rounded young people who can deal with these sorts of situations.¹

Our problem is, we assume our kids are too fragile. Many of us adults just don't believe our kids are capable of failing and then getting back up and moving forward. Instead, we assume we can just talk to them about commonsense items like safe driving, job hunting, breaking up, or hosting parties. Dr. Michael Ungar, a child therapist, says it doesn't work that way.

We seem these days to have a magical notion that children can learn common sense by just watching and listening to others talk about it. That just isn't the way our brains develop. We are experiential beings. Lev Vygotsky, a famous child psychologist from Russia, demonstrated very well what he calls "zones of proximal development." We need to be pushed, not too far, but just enough to learn something new. Good development occurs when we are invited to accept challenges that are just big enough to demand we work at solving them, but that they don't completely defeat us.²

I believe this includes failure.

Consider this fact. Over the years our families have gotten smaller.

We've been able to provide much better care for our children. It's allowed us to pay much more attention to our kids and their self-actualization. Unfortunately, we began to assume that if we really care for these young people, we shouldn't let them fail, fall, fear, or fight. Instead, we will nurture them, keep them safe from all harm, and ensure they are happy as they leave our schools and homes. In short, we made life easy and removed nearly every opportunity to grow strong through struggle and failure.

The Consequences of Refusing to Let Them Fail

Refusing to let kids fail brings two negative outcomes. First, it fosters the fear of failure later in life as adults. Having never mastered it as a child, it becomes a master when the stakes are high. Second, it dilutes the will or motivation to excel.

THE PRINCIPLE

Removing the possibility of failure dilutes the motivation to excel.

Let me illustrate these consequences with a simple analogy. During the past two decades, much playground equipment has been removed from public parks. Adults, especially parents, have worried about children falling down and getting hurt or breaking a bone, so they demanded the monkey bars or jungle gyms be taken down.

This makes sense if we're concerned only about today. Sadly, we've begun to see the unintended by-product of this safety measure. John Tierney reported in the *New York Times* that researchers now question the value of safety-first playgrounds.

Even if children do suffer fewer physical injuries—and the evidence for that is debatable—the critics say that these playgrounds may stunt emotional development, leaving children with anxieties and fears that are ultimately worse than a broken bone.

“Children need to encounter risks and overcome fears on the playground,” said Ellen Sandseter, professor of psychology at Queen Maud University in Norway. “I think monkey bars and tall slides are great. As playgrounds become more and more boring, these are some of the few features that still can give children thrilling experiences with heights and high speed.”

After studying kids on playgrounds in Norway, England and Australia, Dr. Sandseter identified six categories of risky play: exploring heights, experiencing high speed, handling dangerous tools, being near dangerous elements (like fire or water), rough-and-tumble play (like wrestling), and wandering alone away from adult supervision...

“Climbing equipment needs to be high enough, or else it will be too boring in the long run,” Dr. Sandseter said. “Children approach thrills and risks in a progressive manner, and very few children would try to climb to the highest point for the first time they climb. The best thing is to let children encounter these challenges from an early age, and they will then progressively learn to master them through their play over the years.”

Sometimes, of course, their mastery fails, and falls are the common form of playground injury. But these rarely cause permanent damage, either physically or emotionally...A child who's hurt in a fall before the age of 9 is less likely as a teenager to have a fear of heights...

By gradually exposing themselves to more and more dangers on a playground, children are using the same habituation techniques developed by therapists to help adults conquer phobias, according to Dr. Sandseter and a fellow psychologist, Leif Kennair...“Paradoxically, we posit that our fear of children being harmed by mostly harmless injuries may result in more fearful children and increased levels of psychopathology.”³

Helping Kids Fail Well

John Killinger said, “Failure is the greatest opportunity to know who I really am.” I have come to believe that failure is not only *normal* for those who ultimately succeed—it is *necessary*. Dr. Joyce Brothers suggests, “The person interested in success has to learn to view failure as a healthy, inevitable part of the process of getting to the top.” Let’s examine three steps we must take to help kids fail well.

We must create a safe place to fail.

I worked under John C. Maxwell for more than two decades. He taught me this lesson over and over again. In his book *Failing Forward*, he relates the story of an art teacher who performed an experiment with two classes of students. It is a parable on the benefits of failure.

The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the quantity of work produced, while all those on the right side on its quality. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the “quantity” group: fifty pounds rated an “A”, forty pounds a “B” and so on. Those being graded on “quality,” however, needed to produce only one pot—albeit a perfect one—to get an “A.” Well, at grading time a curious fact emerged: the works of the highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the “quantity” group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the “quality” group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.⁴

This illustrates our natural disposition. When people—especially young people—know they are free to try something and fail, their performance usually improves. It brings out the best in them. But if they are preoccupied with trying not to fail, they become paralyzed.

In 1933, the crew building the Golden Gate Bridge fell behind on the deadlines. One of the workers had fallen to his death, causing his colleagues to work more slowly each day for fear of it happening again. Finally, one worker approached the supervisor and asked if a net could be placed underneath the men to save them if they fell. The supervisor was apprehensive to take the time to do this because they were already behind schedule. But he eventually agreed, and a net was hoisted into position. Suddenly, the men worked faster and more efficiently—actually speeding up the completion of the bridge. What enabled them to work faster and better? Removing the fear of failure. Suddenly, it was safe to try what they had feared before.

We must help them see the benefits of failing.

Once we create environments where kids feel safe to fail, we must encourage them to embrace it. Failure is part of growing up and succeeding. Adults need to help them see the advantages of failure. But just what are the benefits of failure? When we handle it well, failure has these advantages:

Failure can create resilience. When a student realizes that failure isn't fatal, she begins to build resilience from within. Just as lifting weights builds physical muscles, pushing back against failure builds emotional muscles. Kids learn to bounce back quickly and try new options to succeed.

Failure can force us to evaluate. Once students overcome the initial discouragement of failing at a goal, they're forced to assess what happened. This is a huge benefit. Why did their attempt fail? What could they do better? Immediate success blinds us to ways to improve.

Failure can motivate us to better performance. If a child grows up in an environment where failure is safe, it actually becomes a source of motivation, not despair. It stimulates and inspires greater effort. As a kid playing baseball, failure provoked me to get back out there and try again.

Failure prompts creativity and discovery. Perhaps a majority of the inventions during the twentieth century were results of initial failures—think of Edison, Bell, and Oppenheimer. It sounds cliché, but failure

is a teacher that guides us to greater insight and innovation...if we'll learn from it.

Failure can develop maturity. Best of all, authentic maturity happens only when we deal with failure well. If I developed any virtues growing up, such as patience, empathy, sacrifice, or tenacity, it was because I learned to regard failure as a friend.

We must help them make failure their best friend.

Benjamin Franklin said, "The things which hurt, instruct." Your *attitude* toward failure determines your *altitude* after failure. The same is true for students. What they allow to reside in their minds makes all the difference. I think Warren Wiersbe was right when he said, "A realist is an idealist who has gone through the fire and been purified. A skeptic is an idealist who has gone through the fire and been burned."

My friend Kyle Stark develops young men for a living. He is the assistant general manager for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Having watched teenagers enter professional baseball, he makes this observation:

Failure separates those who think they want success from those who are determined to win. Failure narrows the playing field. The first people out are those who blame others. Next out are those who lost interest. The weak go first. The strong learn to hang in there and keep bouncing back until they win.

The thin-skinned rarely win due to brittle egos and apprehensive attitudes. Thick skin comes from falling and failing. The falls produce wounds that heal and reveal a connection between resilience and a peculiar resolve that accepts failure as a temporary condition. They accept both good and bad so they don't forfeit the blessing of learning from both.

The thick-skinned prepare to win by increasingly expanding their willingness to endure pain in affirming the degree of true desire. They allow every challenge to serve as an opportunity to change for the better. They continue to learn that bitterness is poison and quickly purge its deadly

influence on their endurance and desire. They see a prize in every problem and potential in every person. They see their faults but never focus on them. They know that whatever is on the mind will eventually get in the mind. The power of positive word choice determines each choice of the next deed. Wasting time talking about everything that cannot change and about nothing that can is pointless.⁵

Stop Cheating Them

So what can we do? Try this. Identify experiences in which you'll allow young people to take calculated risks and experience failure, such as a project or class. Coach them but don't intervene and do the work for them. Help them build emotional muscles that are capable of enduring a failure. Allow them to know from experience that there is still life after failure.

When my son, Jonathan, was a teenager, he double booked himself on the calendar. He asked if I'd call his supervisor and negotiate it for him. I said, "JC, I'd love to, but that won't help you in the long run. I want you to call and determine a win/win solution." He made the call and lived to tell about it. And he now knows how to do it.

Dr. Ungar challenges parents to give their kids the risk taker's advantage.

I'd rather a child ride his bicycle on a busy street and learn how to respect traffic before he gets behind the wheel of a car. I'd rather a child do crazy stunts on the monkey bars at age four, and on his BMX bike at the extreme skateboard park when he is 14 (even if there is a risk of a broken bone), if it means he won't be doing stupid things with his body when he is 24 (like experimenting with excessive drugs or drinking). I'd rather an 8-year-old choose his own friends and suffer the consequences of being taken advantage of or emotionally hurt while his parents are still there to talk with him about it, rather than waiting until he is an ill-prepared 18-year-old who arrives at a college dorm

completely unprepared for the complex relationships he'll navigate as a new student.⁶

Billy was a kid who grew up in such an environment. His parents worried about his social awkwardness in school and his tendency to withdraw, but they continued to encourage him to explore all kinds of ideas to discover what he wanted to do with his life after high school. They made it safe to fail. And fail he did. I'm glad he did—we all have benefited from the success that ultimately followed his failures as a businessman. His name is Bill Gates.

As a 13-year old kid, Bill had already shown an interest in early versions of the computer. From the proceeds of a rummage sale at Lakeside School, his mother suggested they purchase a Teletype terminal for the kids, hoping that this might nudge her son from boredom to passion. It worked.

In the years that followed, however, Bill experienced a number of failures. He was a social outsider, not well connected to others in college. He spent more time in the computer lab than in class and eventually dropped out. He and his partner, Paul Allen, started an initial company called Traf-O-Data that revealed traffic patterns in Seattle. It was considered a failure, and they dropped it. But in an environment where it was safe to fail, Bill continued unwavering, soon launching Microsoft, and the rest is history. He is now one of the richest and most generous men in the world.

The fact is, failure almost always precedes success.

Do we consider Michael Jordan a failure? He stated, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."