

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

By James Lehman, MSW



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. James Lehman explains that while it's natural for parents to worry about failure, there are times when it can be productive for kids—and a chance for them to change.

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

Parents tell me all the time that they fear their child will fail in life. When I ask them what specifically they're afraid of their child failing, usually it's school-related—a certain subject, or perhaps a grade level. The thinking of most parents is, once you start failing in school, it's hard to catch up. For many parents, it creates a crisis in the family when their child fails in a subject or gets bad grades. And I understand that.

I'd like to talk about the word "crisis" for a minute. It's often stated that the Chinese symbol for "crisis" is a combination of the symbols for "danger" and "opportunity." I think that parents see the danger part very clearly in a crisis, but often they don't see the opportunity: your 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 what the real consequences are for not being productive. It might 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. I think if your child misleads and he gets a failing grade, that's the natural consequence for his behavior and he should experience the discomfort of his choices.

Many of the parents I see are uncomfortable with this at first. Instead of allowing their child to fail, they try to get the teacher to change the grade. Believe me, if a parent is in the martyr role, they're going to go up and fight for

their child in school—and they're going to believe they're right. But sadly, what their child is going to learn is that they don't have to take responsibility for their ineffective behavior—that somebody else is going to fight for them. Let me be clear: when you try to change the actions of people around your child so he won't feel disappointed or upset, your child is not going to learn the lesson you imagine he's going to learn. And not only that, he's also not going to learn math, or science, or whatever it is he's been avoiding. Worst of all, he's not even going to learn to not be duplicitous in the future. What he *is* going to learn is that "It's OK. If I screw up enough, Mom will take care of it." Or "Dad has more power than the teacher, so he can take care of it."

Once again we see the danger of your child thinking that power can solve his problems. When that conclusion is made, he learns that power can replace responsibility. In a healthier equation, schoolwork problems are dealt with by the child who gradually takes more responsibility in doing his homework. The power emanates from the responsibility-taking. But if a parent goes and fights with the school and gets the teacher to change the grade, then the power is coming from the wrong place. Your child is going to learn that power trumps responsibility. In fact, he will learn that the power of being manipulative and threatening is more valuable than actually being accountable and doing the work competently.

Many parents have reasons to justify their defense of their child. They may cite the unfairness of the school system, their child's learning difficulties or behavioral problem, the principal's attitude, or the prior history of their child at the school. I understand that those things can be very real. It's easier to fight with the teacher than it is to fight with your child. It's just that simple. And it's easier to change the teacher—or even the school rules—than to get your child to change.

I think 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. To me, this is not the end of the world, it's a lesson, just like anything else designed to help him see that he's not making the grade. Receiving a failing grade is a gauge of how he's doing, and if he's failed something, he needs to solve the problem responsibly.

A word about lying: another thing you should ask yourself is if your child is being dishonest or manipulative about his homework, what else is he being dishonest and manipulative about? And when he's supposed to be studying after school, what is he really doing? This opens up other questions because

we know if somebody is duplicitous in one area, that behavior can spread to other areas quickly. Failing a subject in school is one thing, sudden changes in performance across the board is another.

I believe if your child fails a subject or even fails the year, if you're addressing the problem, you're starting to solve it. It's an opportunity to get your child to make some changes. Failure is an opportunity to get your child to look at himself. Part of parents' sensitivity to this is that if their child fails, they feel like they've failed, too. So they're hyper-sensitive to that, and I understand. It's tough to be a parent who works hard and does the best he or she can, and then have your kids fail. You want to say, "What more can I do?" But the question really is, "What more can my child do?" It's not "What am I *not* doing as a parent?" It's "What is *he* not doing as a student?" That's the right question to ask yourself.

The Benefits of Letting Your Child Feel Discomfort

I think 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 instinctively 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 a price for their choices. And so some parents will fight at the school, they will fight with other parents, they will fight with their kids. They will fight with anybody to claim their child's right to never feel uncomfortable.

Somehow in our culture, protecting your child 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. Personally, I think that's a dangerous trap parents fall into. While I don't think situations should be sought out where a child is uncomfortable, I do think if that 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. The first thing they learn is to avoid similar situations. So if your child is called on in class to answer a homework question and he didn't do it, he can learn to avoid that by doing his homework—not by having his mother tell the teacher not to call on him anymore because it makes him feel bad.

The other thing that happens is that your child builds up a tolerance for discomfort, an emotional callous, if you will, and I think that's very valuable. Discomfort is such a part of our life, whether you're squeezed into a subway car, waiting in line at the supermarket, or passed over for a promotion. Everyone experiences difficult things from time to time, which will make you uncomfortable and frustrated. It's so important for your child to be able to learn how to manage those situations and 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." Suggest a coping skill.

When you shield your child from discomfort, what he learns is that he should never have to feel anything unpleasant in life. He develops a false sense of entitlement. He learns that he doesn't really 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 the tolerance for deviance. If his parents are successful, the teacher will tolerate less compliance from him because of his parents' intervention. 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: 3 Questions Parents Should Ask

Whether dealing with feelings of discomfort or feelings of failure, there are three simple questions parents can ask their child.

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

That's what you want your child to learn, because that's all he can change. The lesson stems from there. 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, "Well, it seems to me like you're making an excuse for not having your homework

done." Or "Seems to me you're blaming me for not having your homework done." Or "It looks to me like you're blaming your teacher for not having your homework done."—whatever the case may be.

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

So it's, "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?"

"What did you learn from being embarrassed when your teacher called on you?" "What did you learn from not passing the test?" Put the responsibility back on your child. If you take his responsibility over, it's just going to become a power struggle. With all the problems that exist in education today, the last thing you need is to be in a power struggle with your child's teacher.

Now you may say, "Well you don't understand, my child's teacher is different." I do understand that. There are effective teachers and ineffective teachers. But let me ask you 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? 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.

About James Lehman, MSW



James Lehman, MSW was a renowned child behavioral therapist who worked with struggling teens and children for three decades. He created the Total Transformation Program to help people parent more effectively. James' foremost goal was to help kids and to "empower parents."