

Talking to Children about Failure

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Most people grow up with the idea that failure is a major problem in their lives. They will go to great lengths to avoid failure. Often this includes avoiding many activities they would truly enjoy just because they are not comfortable with the risks involved. They may need the approval of others to view themselves as successful.

Parental Reactions

Sometimes children come home from school or extracurricular activities feeling a sense of failure. Children often tend to compare themselves to their peers. Your child may be afraid of *your* reaction as well.

Negative Reactions

Parents may react by using sarcasm or by ridiculing their child. This type of teasing is never appropriate. Children have difficulty sorting out what is meant by teasing and what is a direct attack on them.

Parents may also react by becoming angry. When you tell your child, "That's it," or "Never again; you blew it this time," or something even more harsh, it is usually out of anger and frustration. But this will only reinforce the sense of failure in the child.

Statements to Avoid

Some parents try to soften the blow and make excuses such as, "It was just a bad day," or "You did well; they just didn't understand." They may even go so far as to blame someone else and deny the failure. This can be confusing to the child. The child is trying to sort out the incident and needs support, guidance and encouragement.

Suggested Statements

Avoid denial and excuses as your first response. If you truly feel a need to "soften the blow," try a hug, a smile and recognition of the child's effort. Try, "I can see that you tried your best, and I'm proud of you," or "Sometimes things don't go very smoothly. I know you will do better next time."

Positive Reactions

To provide the support and encouragement a child needs, you must first understand what the real meaning of the child's experience involves. Failure should be viewed as unavoidable and as a learning experience. Your child may be viewing the failure as letting *you* down or as proof that he or she will never succeed.

Appropriate questions can be asked to avoid negative reactions and help guide the child toward positive growth. Failure and setbacks are opportunities to learn. Successful people try to evaluate the outcome rather than focus on the win or loss. Ask your child: *What happened? What caused this to happen? What can you do differently next time?* Follow these questions with more encouragement to try new experiences.

Steps for Success

When your child experiences a failure, assure the child that it's OK to make mistakes. Mistakes are a part of life. Be ready to share some of *your* mistakes as well. Affirm the child's feelings. Your child feels bad about this and wants to be understood.

The next step is where the encouragement and support need to come through. It would be easy to say that it's OK for your child to withdraw or quit. However, quitting at this point will reinforce a child's inability to succeed. Children need to be encouraged to try again. Make trying again a "safe" experience. Wait until the child is ready, but don't wait too long. Break the task down into small goals, and work together to accomplish each goal.

At School

You can "set up" a success by carefully planning the events. For example, a child failing a spelling test may need several simple review sessions "set up" to assure success and build his or her confidence. Ask for help from concerned teachers or counselors if it is a school situation.

At Home

If it's a home-related experience, use the same approach. For example, a teen learning to drive may have a bad experience. Allow time for the child to think it over, and then make a plan together for success. To build confidence, be sure to "set up" a success, such as driving out in the country to avoid major pressures. Always offer encouragement and avoid the "You'll never learn" statements.

Encouragement

Each attempt and small success needs to be followed up with encouragement. "You can be proud of how you handled that." "You did it! Be proud of yourself!" "You really solved that problem well." These are examples of appropriate encouragement.

Avoid "fixing" your child's problems. Give the child space and time to think about the incident and begin to understand why it happened. Listen without judging. Avoid saying, "I think you should..." Instead, say, "Tell me what happened," or "What could you do differently next time?" Finally, provide another opportunity soon after the incident to begin succeeding so the real growth and learning will follow. Encourage the efforts as well as the successes.

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