

Teaching Your Child to Fail

by Dale Simpson, Ph.D.

John inadvertently spills his drink at the restaurant. Sarah leaves a library book in the rain, ruining it. Mistakes push their way uninvited into our daily lives.

What do we do regarding mistakes and shortsightedness that occur in our children's lives? Here are a few things to keep in mind when children fail.

- 1) Stay in control of your own emotions. It's not about you.
- 2) Allow reasonable consequences to occur so that both learning and some restitution (if appropriate) will result. For example, if a child leaves a tool out in the rain where it rusts and is no longer useful, the child will be asked to purchase a new tool. If it's extremely expensive, the child should contribute toward some of the tool's replacement cost. An alternative might be for the child to help oil and repair the tool while other children are playing so that it is restored to its original function.
- 3) Cultivate a view of failure as simply another teaching moment. There is a story of a project manager for a multinational corporation who, having completed an assigned task, caused the company to lose one million dollars. His boss called him in for what the manager was sure to be his unceremonious firing. The boss then presented him with a new twenty-million-dollar project to supervise. The surprised man accepted the challenge, saying, "I have to be honest.... I thought you were going to fire me." The boss retorted, "Fire you? Not when I've just spent one million dollars to train you!"

What we do not want to do is to react to failure out of anger. All it will do is to make the child feel badly and confused. This teaches the child to hide his mistakes from the parent rather than help him prevent mistakes. The child will also internalize our rage at him so he develops a strong sense of shame and "badness" when messing up. He will project this to others' mistakes at a later date and pass the tradition down.

After mistakes, we want to offer brief, appropriate instructions only if the child does not appear to know how to accomplish the task. Mistakes are often made primarily due to lack of attention to the task; a task they generally understand. Saying little is the best approach.

Teaching our children how to handle failure is an exciting part of parenting and one that will be entirely useful for them throughout their lives. Furthermore, God will get the most out of their lives when they are willing to take managed risks and are not afraid of bold attempts at accomplishing certain goals. Surely not all people can be leaders, but we don't want to inhibit our children just because of our angry reactions. Let's pass on a legacy that teaches the difference between sin and mistakes. Let's eliminate crushing shame as a response to failure in our children. Ensure that your kids know how to fail.... the right way.

Dale Simpson, PhD, is the father of five grown children. As a practicing psychologist for more than 36 years, he has counseled children, teens, adults and couples and is currently practicing in Venice, Florida. Dr. Simpson was a co-founder and publisher of Homeschooling Today Magazine, wrote a column called Inside the Family for the magazine, served as a featured speaker at numerous state homeschooling and parenting conferences, and is the publisher of Learning for Life Press. A Study in Wisdom, Homeschooling for Life, The Easy to Make Paper Airplane Book, and the **Think It, Feel It, Say It Board Game** are published by Learning for Life Press. Sign up for our free newsletter and also drop by for free articles on family life. www.learningforlifepress.com

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