



## **Jessica Lahey** **The Gift of Failure**

*How To Let Go So Your Children Can Succeed*

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As a teacher and parent, Jessica Lahey has an important message for parents: Let your children make mistakes and even, God forbid, FAIL! For many parents, especially highly educated and successful ones, this is blasphemy. "Failure never" we say, but it is only in admitting and taking responsibility for our mistakes, and failures, that we learn to solve problems and implement changes in our behavior. In a nutshell, that is how we grow.

This is the process of learning resiliency, and resiliency takes practice. In life, failure is inevitable. So as parents, we need to ensure that our children learn how to cope with it. If kids have opportunities to struggle (over a difficult math assignment, or any other difficult task) and figure out their own unique ways of solving problems, they will learn independence. If they get the answers wrong, or make mistakes, and learn from them, they will learn resiliency. At both Harvard and Stanford, administrators are talking about "failure deprived" students and it's as a serious problem.

Children are growing up in a much more competitive culture than the one we grew up in. They are feeling pressure from all sides, so we need to give them perspective at home. If parents always expect excellence, children will be driven to consider compromising their integrity (by cheating, plagiarizing, and/or taking prescription medications not prescribed for them) in order to get the grades they feel their parents expect of them or they feel they have to get in order to get into a 'good' college. No child is immune from this pressure, but the way in which we act and converse with our children will influence their perspective and influence their perception of our values. Instead of asking, "What grade did you get on your test?" ask:

- ~ "What material was the test covering?"
- ~ "Was the material interesting?"
- ~ "Did you feel you learned the material?"
- ~ "Did you give yourself adequate time to study?"

These are the kind of questions that show parent's interest in 'process' over 'product' and this will make all the difference. With this kind of parenting, our kids will internalize the positive value of learning out of curiosity and interest rather than learning for the grade. Our children will be more inclined to be life-long learners who are motivated from within when parents turn their attention to what really matters.

Ms. Lahey also emphasizes the difference between ***Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators***: Intrinsic motivation is based on enjoyment and interest in an activity, task or project; it is not based on outcome, reward or punishment. She contends both children and adults are happier, more invested, more creative and work harder when intrinsically motivated.

While extrinsic motivation can help both children and adults get through *short-term* tasks in which they have little interest, intrinsic motivation is more suited to long-term projects. Ms. Lahey used washing the dishes as an example where the reward for completing the task may be a clean kitchen, ice cream for desert or earned allowance. But when it comes to *inspired work* (academic or otherwise) intrinsic motivation is essential.

So how do we help our kids become more intrinsically motivated? One way is to simply express interest in the content of their schoolwork; not in the outcome (grade/scores). Specifically:

- ~ Focus on content and process, not outcome.
- ~ Be curious about the subject.
- ~ Ask provocative questions.
- ~ Make connections and talk about the relevancy in your adult world.

*Get excited* about the topic and the learning; *down play* the outcome (a grade on a test or essay). If you view learning as a creative process, your child will too. Children will become more invested in their work and less worried about the outcome.

How can schools and faculty support the development of intrinsic motivation?

- ~ Develop interesting, curriculum for students
- ~ Allow students to develop content through their own research and interpretation
- ~ Discuss relevancy to their lives, the real world, and science today
- ~ Assess students' knowledge with projects that involve critical thinking
- ~ Reduce the frequency of tests and quizzes
- ~ De-emphasize grades: grade for growth
- ~ Encourage students to learn from and fix mistakes on quizzes and test
- ~ Allow student to rewrite and improves essays and term papers
- ~ Encourage questioning when students do not understand material
- ~ Allow for alternative ways for solving problems

Jessica Lahey stresses that failure is not something to be avoided at all cost. On the contrary, it is only through failure that our children can grow and become resilient. By focusing on process over product, parents can help encourage their children's natural curiosity and strengthen their intrinsic motivation to learn.