

## Teaching Your Kids to *Not* Fear Failure

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Sarah here. In our little corner of the world, summertime is officially here. The sun, humidity and mosquitoes are out in full force and the days are *long* (like it doesn't get dark till after 9 PM long). These long days equal lots of free time for your kids, who may or may not be participating in camp or structured activities this year. So...when we (as people) have tons of free time, what do we do? Well...based on the images and videos that have popped up on the internet, I'm going to say that even adults start to go a little stir-crazy.



The amount of creativity, visual-spatial reasoning and fine motor control needed to create these masterpieces is mindboggling! In all seriousness, when people have time on their hands, they may pursue old hobbies or forge into new territory. Summer is a great time for branching out. Just like it takes a long time for a tree to grow from a seed, it takes a lot of time and effort to learn new things. And, just like every seed doesn't grow into a tree, every avenue we pursue doesn't result in success.

As my husband jokingly told me years ago when I artlessly arranged a bouquet, "Well...you're good at *so many* things...it makes sense that you've tapped out." I'm awesome at a lot of things, but he's right- floral arrangement *isn't* one of my special talents. But I gave it a shot, had fun and enjoyed my vase of flowers, which was far from perfect. I also figured out what didn't work, so I did things a little differently the next time. **We aren't great at everything we set out**

**to do but that doesn't mean we shouldn't set out to do great things.** So, this summer while your kids are at home, help them learn that failure *isn't* the end of the world.

As I've mentioned before, I am an avid hobbyist. During and since quarantine, I've completed a lot of projects. Some—like assembling puzzles—are things that I'm great at. Other projects—like making friendship bracelets—required me to take the basic skills I had and build on them to really step up my game. And some projects—like weaving bags on a lap loom—were new to me and required *hours* of research, reading, learning and practice.

Why the heck am I talking with you about crafting? Part of being a crafter is having patience and accepting the inevitability that I *will* mess up. I will need to fix things and may need to start over...maybe more than once. I don't like making mistakes and the learning process can be infuriating. But I love making and since mistakes are part of the process, I expect to be imperfect. I'm okay with making mistakes. After all, failure is how we learn.



One thing I see *all the time* in my patients is fear of failure. Not that fear of failure is always bad. There's the fear that can motivate people to work harder- like when they know they have to give a presentation in front of class and they work hard to prepare and practice, so they will do

well and won't embarrass themselves in front of their classmates. But there's also the fear that gets people to quit before they even get started. *That* fear is the one that's problematic.

I work with so many talented, bright, amazing kids, teens and young adults who are great at so many things. But that kind of success can create an *unhelpful* fear of failure. Especially when kids get so much praise and reinforcement for being "so \_\_\_\_\_" (*fill in the blank with smart, athletic, creative, etc.*) or being "so great at \_\_\_\_\_" (*fill in the blank with school, soccer, swimming, singing, playing the flute, etc.*).

I'm not saying you shouldn't praise your kids for their successes! It's important for all of us to know what we're good at. Plus, recognition feels good! It's just that when things come easily (as with natural talents and skills) and kids *only* get praised for successful *outcomes* instead of the effort, the process, or the learning that took place, then they don't actually know how to deal with failure when it inevitably happens. Failure becomes threatening so kids avoid branching out or quit once activities become more challenging. Also, kids sometimes can't manage the idea that there are people out there who are better than they are at their special talents. Not being "the best" becomes a threat that can lead to unhelpful avoidance or becoming overly competitive.

I return again to crafting. It took me *years* to stop avoiding my sewing machine and I did so only after a few false starts involving me mucking up royally, becoming exasperated and announcing that I couldn't do it. I've *definitely* had some humbling life experiences with sewing. I "made a blanket for my daughter" (i.e., sewed a satin binding onto a piece of flannel fabric) under the tutelage of my mother, mother-in-law and a friend. I finished my very simple project alongside prolific women who were quilting, crafting zippered purses and custom designing clothing. I will never be the quilter or seamstress that the other ladies are. Sewing *didn't* come naturally or easily for me. I worked *very hard* for a modest outcome. And, I'm proud of myself for sticking with it, conquering my fear of the sewing machine and making something my daughter enjoys.



So, this summer, why not lead by example? Brush off an old hobby or take up a new one. Model what learning *actually* looks like for your kids. Show them that it's okay if learning isn't a linear, easy process. Let them see you be proud of an imperfect product. It's okay if you get frustrated- show your kids how to work through it. Demonstrate that it's okay to take a break, regroup and then return to something later. Help them see that *progress* can be incredibly rewarding, so they stop stressing so much about *perfection*. Encourage your kids to pursue new skills this summer. Right now, things are pretty low stakes and there isn't a lot of "pressure" to succeed. It's okay if all of their efforts don't all pan out. We don't have to wipe those experiences under the rug. No one is great at everything. And, there's *always* someone better. But, by focusing on their growth, we encourage kids to become lifelong learners who are always up for a challenge.