**Parents, stop hovering! It’s not your job to remove every obstacle from your kids’ paths**

**We've taught our kids to fear failure, and in doing so, we've blocked the surest and clearest path to their success**

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I became a parent and a middle school teacher in the same year, and these twin roles have shaped the way I’ve raised my children and educated my students. Over the course of my first decade raising two boys and teaching hundreds of children, I began to feel a creeping sense of unease, a suspicion that something was rotten in the state of my parenting. But it was only when my elder child entered middle school that my worlds collided and the source of the problem became clear to me: today’s overprotective, failure-avoidant parenting style has undermined the competence, independence, and academic potential of an entire generation. From my vantage point at the front of a classroom, I’d long viewed myself as part of the solution, a champion of my students’ intellectual and emotional bravery. However, as the same caution and fear I witnessed in my students began to show up in my own children’s lives, I had to admit that I was part of the problem, too. We have taught our kids to fear failure, and in doing so, we have blocked the surest and clearest path to their success. That’s certainly not what we meant to do, and we did it for all the best and well-intentioned reasons, but it’s what we have wrought nevertheless. Out of love and desire to protect our children’s self-esteem, we have bulldozed every uncomfortable bump and obstacle out of their way, clearing the manicured path we hoped would lead to success and happiness. Unfortunately, in doing so we have deprived our children of the most important lessons of childhood. The setbacks, mistakes, miscalculations, and failures we have shoved out of our children’s way are the very experiences that teach them how to be resourceful, persistent, innovative, and resilient citizens of this world.

As I stood there in my middle school classroom on the day of my personal epiphany, looking at the students before me and seeing my own parenting clearly for the first time, I resolved to do what I needed to do to guide both my children and my students back toward the path to competence and independence. The way isn’t smooth, and the going certainly isn’t easy, but that’s kind of the point. We parents are going to have to step back, leave those scary obstacles lying in the road, and allow our children to face them head-on. Given our support, love, and a lot of restraint, our kids can learn how to engineer their own solutions and pave their way toward success that is truly of their own making.

The discomfort I’d been feeling in my own parenting had been growing for a while, but I could not put my finger on where I’d gone wrong. I read all the parenting blogs, from the austere to the zealous, and read books by the experts on how to raise happy, healthy children. However, as I watched my boys approach their teenage years, something was amiss. They were good, well-adjusted kids, but I couldn’t shake the sense that when it came time for them to head out on their own and make their way in the world, they were ill-prepared. As long as they stayed inside the safe haven I’d created for them, they were confident and successful, but when forced to venture outside, would they know how to function? I’d so successfully researched, planned, and constructed their comfortable childhoods that I’d failed to teach them how to adapt to the world on its terms.

I never meant to teach my children to be helpless or fear failure, and a life of anxiety is certainly not what I envisioned for them. On the contrary, I thought my kids would grow up brave, in the sort of wild, free idyll I experienced as a child. I wanted them to explore the woods with a pocketknife and a couple of cookies shoved in their pockets, build tree forts, shoot handmade arrows at imaginary enemies, and swim in the local watering hole. I wanted them to have the time and the courage to try new things, explore their boundaries, and climb one branch beyond the edge of their comfort zones.

But somehow, somewhere, that idyllic version of childhood morphed into something very different, a high-stakes, cutthroat race to the top. Today, careless afternoons in the woods seem like a quaint throwback because the pressure to succeed from an early age has ramped up for both parents and kids. It never lets up, and there is no longer room in our children’s schedules for leisure time in the woods, let alone opportunities to problem-solve their way out of the muck and mire they encounter out there. In the new normal, every moment counts, and the more successful our kids are as students, athletes, and musicians, the more successful we judge ourselves as parents. The race to the top starts when children take their first steps and does not end until a six-figure income and socioeconomic upward mobility are secured. And, come on, what kind of negligent mother allows her kids to play alone in the woods during homework time, with pockets full of gluten and sugar, armed to the teeth with pocketknives and arrows?

Standing in my middle school classroom, frozen in that horrible realization of my own culpability in the epidemic of overparenting, I finally understood just how far off the path we parents have strayed.

We bring a beautiful, precious child into the world, and after those first moments of bliss wear off, we realize that our new purpose in life is to protect this fragile human being from harm. And if we are to believe the fear-mongering mass media, that harm is all around us. Baby snatchers disguised as maternity nurses, antibiotic-resistant germs, toxic chemicals, disease-carrying ticks, bullying kids, unfair teachers, murderous school shooters . . . no wonder we’ve gone nuts where our children are concerned.

However, this fear doesn’t just cause us to overparent; it makes us feel overwhelmed, myopic, and much too credulous of those who seek to stoke our parental fears. It’s easier to self-soothe by shielding our kids from all risk than to take a pause and figure out which risks are necessary to their development and emotional health. We protect our kids from all threats, whether real or imagined, and when we tuck our kids in bed at night, free of cuts, bruises, or emotional hurt, we have, for one more day, found tangible evidence of our parenting success.

We revel in their safety and reassure ourselves that there’s plenty of time to teach them how to deal with risk and failure. Maybe tomorrow I’ll let them walk to school, but today, they got to school safely. Maybe tomorrow they will do their own homework, but today, they are successful in math. Maybe tomorrow continues until it’s time for them to leave home, and by then, they have learned that we will always be there to save them from themselves.

I am as guilty as the next parent; I have inadvertently extended my children’s dependence in order to appropriate their successes as evidence and validation of my parenting. Every time I pack my child’s lunch for him or drive his forgotten homework to school, I am rewarded with tangible proof of my conscientious mothering. I love, therefore I provide. I provide, therefore I love. While I know, somewhere in the back of my mind, that my children really should be doing these kinds of tasks for themselves, it makes me feel good to give them these small displays of my deep, unconditional love. I reassure myself with what feels like a vast expanse of childhood, stretching out for years, its eventual end invisible over the horizon. My kids will have their entire lives to pack their lunches and remember their backpacks, but I only have a very brief window of time to be able to do these things for them.

There’s a term for this behavior in psychiatric circles. It’s called enmeshment, and it’s not healthy for kids or parents. It’s a maladaptive state of symbiosis that makes for unhappy, resentful parents and “failure to launch” children who move back in to their bedrooms after college graduation. In 2012, 36 percent of adults age 18–31 still lived in their parents’ home, and while some of that figure is due to declining employment and marriage statistics, these numbers are part of a trend that’s been rising for decades. In order to raise healthy, happy kids who can begin to build their own adulthood separate from us, we are going to have to extricate our egos from our children’s lives and allow them to feel the pride of their own accomplishments as well as the pain of their own failures.

 We are also going to have to knock it off with the competitive parenting, because we have managed to whip ourselves up into a frenzy of anxiety and paranoia. Our Facebook posts and soccer tournament sideline chat is jam-packed with passive-aggressive tales of academic honors and athletic glory. As our kids get older, we spin tales of coast-to-coast college tours, SAT prep and AP tutoring, because didn’t you hear? According to the news, today’s college degree counts as much as our high school diplomas . . . and in order to get that college degree, our kids will have to jump through all sorts of hoops we never had to deal with because colleges have become more expensive and selective . . . and there is no such thing as a safety school anymore . . . and as the economy is in the toilet, once our kids graduate from whatever college will deign to take them, they may have to work as minimum-wage baristas in order to be able to afford to share an apartment with sixteen of their friends.

We need to stop and take a very deep breath. Research shows that this behavior, this “Pressured Parents Phenomenon,” is extremely contagious. Even when I’ve vaccinated myself against it ahead of time, I have fallen victim to it as well. Consequently, I am not the mother I hoped I would be. I hover over homework and obsess about grade point averages as the specter of college admission looms large on the horizon. It is as if the better angels of my nature have been cowed into silence, and I’ve bought into the hype: unless I push my kids to do more, be more, they will fail, and, by logical extension, I will have failed as a mother. In my darker moments, I’ve cast around for others to blame for my plight, and I’ve found plenty of scapegoats. Reaction against the hands-off parenting of the fifties and sixties, extension of the attachment parenting we employed when our children were in infancy, and guilt over our failed attempts to strike an impossible balance between work and family. There does not seem to be a middle ground anymore, a safe harbor between having it all and having nothing.

The parenting pendulum swings back and forth over time, so the fact that it is currently hanging at its apex at the extreme end of the overparenting arc isn’t really anyone’s fault. It’s part of the action and reaction that constitute the history of our species. Early in the twentieth century, parents were instructed not to touch their children at all lest we spoil them, but by the time the nineties swung into view, experts had latched on to attachment parenting, in which we were instructed to sleep, eat, bathe, urinate, and breathe without ever letting go of our kangaroo-style infants. Sure, the pendulum swung through a sane, middle ground between 1970 and 1980, and I am forever grateful I was allowed to play in its gentle shade as it passed overhead. However, that golden moment of equilibrium was over much too soon, and we began our upward swing toward the place we find ourselves in today.

If you grew up in the 1970s, some of you more than likely were latchkey kids, with both parents working outside the home. While some of us associate the term with a childhood lit with a rosy, romantic hue, others recall the lack of supervision as near-abandonment, and have begun making reparations to their children accordingly. In our efforts to make up for our own perceived lack of guidance, we are ever-present, ever-helpful, ever- reminding, ever-rescuing. As part of this reparation effort, some parents—mostly women—abandoned their executive offices for home, determined to mindfully parent their children as full-time caregivers. Often, mothers dove in to full-time parenting armed with the skills they had earned in higher education and in the business world, and they took no prisoners. How hard could parenting be? Guiding children into Ivy League colleges, like making partner in a Wall Street law firm, was simply a matter of organization, drive, and the meticulous management of academic and extracurricular resources.

Parents who remained in the workforce, meanwhile, were made to feel deficient for prioritizing work over their children, and felt obligated to show the world that they could do it all. Again, success was just a matter of scheduling and some sleight of hand. Cupcakes here, boardroom there. Parent-teacher conference here, Bluetooth Skype with clients on the way home in the car. Besides, the mortgage and child-care payments required two incomes to maintain, and as the economy tanked, the suggestion that one parent could simply kiss the stability of a paycheck and benefits goodbye in order to parent full-time seemed ludicrous.

We did the best we could with the skills we’d worked so hard to acquire. Schedules of meetings and project management schemes were repurposed into color-coded school activity and carpool calendars, scheduled down to the minute. Management skills formerly used to guide teams of employees toward quarterly sales goals were appropriated to plan semester-long campaigns to help children improve their grades. I know this, because I’ve used every trick in my college- and law-school-educated quiver. When I returned to work after my elder son, Ben, was born, I used spreadsheets and database software to chronicle his first words, the input and output of his digestive system, and his reading progress. These were the tools at my disposal, and since I’d worked long and hard to acquire them, it hardly seemed right to let them go to waste. I took comfort in these measures when faced with the silent, sucking void I found when I searched for clues that would validate my parenting. The only other ally I found in this endeavor was my son’s pediatrician, who at least provided me with growth charts that plotted my infant’s progress against all the other rival babies out there. If his weight and height were just above the 50th percentile on the growth chart, great. I’d done some good, solid mothering. If his BMI was a little lower than average, well done, me; I got some bonus points for staving off the epidemic of childhood obesity. At the end of the appointment, though, I needed the good doctor to bestow judgment and answer my unspoken plea: Do I qualify for honors or is this parenting business pass/fail? What about those other parents out there in the waiting room—did I beat them? Come on, help me out here, Doc: what’s my grade?

Of course, the strategies that make us successful in the business world do not translate to the business of parenting. Reams of research papers on child development and behavioral psychology reveal that while these methods may work to motivate assembly-line workers, they are terrible tools for motivating children to engage in creative problem-solving, and they actually undermine long-term motivation and investment in learning. Even more damaging, the use of rewards and incentives prioritizes scores and grades over exploration and experimentation, which undermines a teacher’s ability to foster self-directed and intrinsically motivated learning.

Despite the wealth of evidence regarding the folly of these methods, we continue to incorporate them into our parenting, and lacking regular performance reviews from some higher authority, many of us look to our children to provide the feedback we need in order to feel as if we are doing our jobs well. If our children are on the honor roll and make varsity soccer as a freshman, we must be great parents. Conversely, when a child fails a test or receives detention for neglecting to hand in his science paper, we must have done something wrong. Parents, after all, are judged by their children’s accomplishments rather than their happiness, so when our children fail, we appropriate those failures as our own.

This is not only disastrous for parents’ self-worth; it’s short-sighted and unimaginative. Failure—from small mistakes to huge miscalculations—is a necessary and critical part of our children’s development. Failure is too often characterized as a negative: an F in math or a suspension from school. However, all sorts of disappointments, rejections, corrections, and criticisms are small failures, all opportunities in disguise, valuable gifts misidentified as tragedy. Sadly, when we avoid or dismiss these opportunities, in order to preserve children’s sense of ease and short-term happiness, we deprive them of the experiences they need to have in order to become capable, competent adults.

Failure is frightening enough when faced firsthand, but when our children wander too close to its jaws, we are overcome with a primal, overpowering need to protect. From an evolutionary perspective, this response makes perfect sense. We are programmed in our hearts and our DNA to shield our children from harm, so when tasked with shepherding our genetic offspring safely to adulthood, we are prepared to fight anything that threatens their success with all the ferocity our nails and teeth and smarts can muster. Unfortunately, when we are all hopped up on adrenaline and cortisol, our brains can’t distinguish between genuine, mortal threats to life and limb, and the manageable threat of a soccer opponent flying downfield to steal the ball away from our child. Leaping in front of an attacking predator on the savannah and screaming at the referee for a bad call are just “two different manifestations of the same biological trigger.” So when you want to push that little girl who tossed sand in your child’s face or punch that teacher who threatened your child with a D on her science project, remember that while these actions are not sane, socially appropriate responses to minor stressors, their genesis comes from our shared biological nature. We all want our children to make it safely to adulthood, and it often feels as if it is all on us to make that happen.

Lacking saber-toothed tigers and precarious cliffs, failure feels like the greatest threat of all, the one danger our children can’t afford to encounter in these times of academic pressure and exclusionary admissions. Yet history is filled with stories of extraordinary people, inventors and innovators, who learned how to appropriate the gifts of failure to their own advantage, who did not run from it, but stayed in its company long enough to become comfortable amid the jumbled wreckage of their dashed hopes and flawed plans. They learned how to salvage what was working while leaving these plans behind only to regroup and rebuild. As recent MacArthur Fellow and former middle school teacher Angela Duckworth has found, the ability to attend to a task and stick to long-term goals is the greatest predictor of success, greater than academic achievement, extracurricular involvement, test scores, and IQ. She calls this grit, and first discovered its power in the classroom, while teaching seventh-grade math. She left teaching to pursue research on her hunch, and her findings have changed the way educators perceive student potential. Gritty students succeed, and failure strengthens grit like no other crucible.

*Excerpted from*[*“The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed”*](http://www.amazon.com/Gift-Failure-Parents-Children-Succeed/dp/0062299239/?tag=saloncom08-20)*by Jessica Lahey. Published by HarperCollins. Copyright © 2015 Jessica Lahey.*