

# Hecht: Let kids fail and 8 ways to help them

Pam J. Hecht, Special to WNC Parent Published 5:09 a.m. ET Jan. 22, 2020

Celebrate defeat!

It can be hard to comfort a child who's failing at something, particularly if said child is flailing her arms around, throwing pencils on the floor and screaming, "Why can't I do this?"

One might fantasize about aiming a wand and casting a freezing spell or dispensing a tranquilizer dart with a crossbow. Or, making geometry illegal.

What doesn't help the matter is when another student, writing a report on Albert Einstein, quotes that historical smarty pants, yelling across the classroom, "Failure is success in progress."

I'd like to say that the troubled child in midtantrum took those wise words to heart, but instead what transpired involved several wads of crumpled notebook paper flying through the air at warp speed.

"Save yourselves," I said, as we all ran for cover.

Some kids take failure extra hard, particularly those who are accustomed to mastering most things easily. But, as experts say, learning to deal with failure is just as important a skill, if not more so, as succeeding.

As someone who has failed at lots of things, several of which have caused mild concussions or extreme embarrassment (not to mention the loss of a grade school spelling bee that haunts me to this day,) I am well-acquainted with failure. I encourage my own kids to fail wildly by displaying appropriate behavior during a total bust, i.e., by refraining from having a meltdown when I can't figure out how to work the new-fangled "smart" TV.

## 8 parenting tips on failure

Here are some things to keep in mind, to help your kids fail with gusto:

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- 1. Empathize about the sad reality of screwing up.** saying, "I can see you are disappointed that you totally blew it. It sucks when you can't do something. I should know, I'm old and I've bombed a bunch of times." Play up the talents they do have.
- 2. Try again, at the right time.** An ambitious person once said, "If at first you don't succeed, try try again." What that person should have mentioned was that before trying again, try having a snack or a nap first.
- 3. Role model failing with dignity.** For example, when another family dinner is a colossal fail (and a fire in the toaster oven involves an impromptu marshmallow roast), don't freak out; instead, pleasantly agree to take-out pizza.
- 4. Try and try again.** Even if you know they'll fail, step back and allow them to learn through trial and error. Coping with disappointment is a painfully-acquired skill. If necessary, have tissues — and ear plugs — handy.
- 5. Applaud perseverance.** Thomas Edison tried 10,000 times. It's why we have indoor lighting. Be a spin doctor: "You figured out different ways to do it wrong! Kudos!"
- 6. Brainstorm about what your child can do to be more successful next time** or, if necessary, whether or not it's time to move on. Sometimes giving up is a good thing, particularly when they clearly lack natural aptitude and in fact may cause themselves (and others) bodily harm. I may be referring to myself on a ski slope, but I'm not saying for sure.
- 7. Don't let them beat themselves up.** When they're too hard on themselves, explain your zero tolerance policy on bullying and discipline them heavily. Ask, "Would you say that to a friend?"
- 8. Move.** Lastly, and most importantly, if frustration occurs and objects are flying, get out of the way.

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