

# SAMVEDANA

## Failure Is an Option

A little disappointment can actually benefit your child -- as long as you teach him how to bounce back from it and cope with failure.

Whenever Mita takes her daughters, Siya, 5, and Nina, 4, out to eat, she asks if they can have the same toy in their children's meal so neither feels slighted. But one time the girls got different things because the restaurant had run out of the toy they both wanted. Siya started crying hysterically, so much so that Mita drove to four more franchises in fruitless pursuit of matching toys. By the time she gave up, it was dark, the children were fast asleep in their car seats, and she felt foolish. "I learned that avoiding a child's disappointment can be harder than helping her deal with it," she says.

Many parents today seem willing to go to ever-greater lengths to protect their children from the pain of dashed expectations. Consider how many preschools have a policy against inviting only select classmates to a birthday celebration; everyone must be included. At the party, you have to avoid playing musical chairs because someone ends up without a seat, feeling excluded.

The irony is that disappointments are actually beneficial for children. Learning to deal with setbacks helps them develop key characteristics they'll need to succeed, such as coping skills, emotional resilience, creative thinking, and the ability to collaborate. Parents see failure as a source of pain for their child instead of an opportunity for him to say, 'I can deal with this. I'm strong.'

If you're shaking your head and clinging to the idea that it's your job to make your child feel like a million bucks, you might be interested in what the research shows. It's been found that having high self-esteem didn't cause children to get better grades or do better in their career. It was also found that students who were faring poorly in college did even worse following efforts to boost their self-esteem.

So should you resist the urge to rebuild your child's block tower when it tumbles to the floor, or refrain from talking to his coach if he never gets to play goalie? There's no right answer. You need to determine how much struggling he can

bear. But there are everyday steps you can take to teach him how to cope when things don't work out exactly the way he wants.

### **Guiding Your Child**

#### **Be your child's guide, not his savior.**

You can't be there to soothe him every time he feels left out or falls short at a task, so prepare your child to manage setbacks. The next time he comes home crying because the other children wouldn't let him play Hide-n- Seek you might say, "How did you feel when they wouldn't let you join them?" Then ask how he might change the situation next time. Get him brainstorming. The more possible solutions he can come up with, the better." Avoid nixing silly ideas or you'll shut down his creative problem-solving. Instead, you might say to him, "Yes, that's one option. What else could you do?" Preschoolers may need to be prompted with questions like, "Do you want to start your own game next time with some other friends?"

#### **Pare back the praise.**

Lavishing a child with compliments can do more harm than good. Children who are over praised become dependent on others for validation .Making an effort is something children can control, and so it instills in them the power to work harder and to deal with failure. That's not to say you should never praise your child, but a little goes a long way -- especially when it's specific. Instead of saying, "You're the best big sister ever," try, "It was nice that you helped your little sister get dressed." This shows her what she's doing well rather than just pumping her up.

#### **Encourage them to try new things.**

Children naturally gravitate toward the hobbies that interest them and at which they excel. But if your child avoids trying a different activity because she's afraid of how she'll perform, she'll lose the urge to broaden her horizons.

Parents often limit their children by being overprotective. Ritika was hesitant to enroll her then 3-year-old daughter, Nandini, in skating. "She's very cautious and gets scared easily," Ritika says. But She was pleasantly surprised by the result. "The instructor told her that Nandini has a tremendous competitive streak and seems to be a natural."

Make a point of introducing your child to new things while making it clear that she shouldn't feel the need to smash any world records (at least not right away). Your job is to emphasize effort and improvement.

### **Set a (realistic) example**

#### **Teach them to delay gratification.**

Whether it's chocolate before dinner or skipping schoolwork to go to the playground, children want what they want when they want it. But encouraging a child to wait helps him develop self-control, a skill he'll rely on throughout his life.

To nurture self-control, It is recommended that establishing house rules -- such as "You must hang your blazer in the almirah as soon as you take it off" -- and enforcing them without exceptions. Once a child learns that these rules aren't negotiable, he'll more easily accept that it's homework first and TV second or that his room must be cleaned up before a playing out. And soon enough doing these things will become a habit.

#### **Be a good role model.**

Your child watches you like a hawk, so it's important to handle your own disappointments with grace. If you panic every time you misplace your cell phone or curse when you stain a shirt, you're not demonstrating healthy coping skills.

Use phrases that will help your child cope with his own shortcomings, such as, "I'll try harder next time" or "I've done it once; I can do it again." And take responsibility when you goof ("I'm sorry I forgot to bring your apron. Silly Mommy.") This shows that adults make mistakes too -- and own up to them.

#### **Manage expectations.**

Children fail tests, strike out, and forget their lines. Picnics get canceled when it rains. Stores run out of popular dolls. You can't prevent these things from happening, but you can reduce your child's distress by keeping her anticipation within reason. Rather than talking about exciting plans as guarantees, treat them as mere possibilities. Then if things don't work out in the end, you've cushioned the blow -- and reinforced the lesson that minor disappointments are a part of life.

## When to Step In

You can't shield your child from every little setback, but there are times when she'll need your help.

**If failing would cause him tremendous humiliation.** When your child forgets his costume for the school play, don't teach him a lesson in responsibility. Bring it to him.

**If your child is in danger.** Just because her friends are advanced swimmers doesn't mean you should let your beginner go into the deep end.

### Some quick fix remedies:

1. Show that you love the child unconditionally.
2. Model how you deal with failure.
3. Learn what is possible for children at different age levels. Have realistic expectations.
4. Help the child analyze what happened and focus on long-term goals, which may lead him to try again or move in another direction more attuned to his strengths and interests. Explain that the world doesn't come to an end because of that failure.
5. Encourage activities where the child's talents and interests bring success. Teach the child to use his positive strengths and learn from the failure.
6. Help the child deal with his emotion, be it "joy, pride, guilt, shame, sadness or a host of other emotions," by letting the child talk about how he feels or help him find the words to express them. The parent can describe incidents when he/she failed.
7. Give real life examples of people who experienced great failure but became successful in the world.
8. Help the child develop supporting social relationships, friends and caregivers who demonstrate that they care and share happy ventures.
9. Show faith; demonstrate optimism which can become contagious.

### Negative strategies

To parents failure is such a toxic word. Parents and caregivers may err on the side of over-protection or false expectations. Here are some examples:

1. **"You can" encouragement.** Like the little red engine that made it up the hill in the child's story, parents persist to insist, "You can." But what if the child can't? I remember a friend whose son wanted to be a mechanic whereas his

dad wanted him to go to college, maybe become a lawyer. The boy's natural curiosity led him to learn to fix small appliances around the house but the father persisted to insist that the boy choose academic high school courses. The son failed several subjects and quit school. Later he returned to follow his interests.

2. **Over praise for intelligence or effort.** The child who is constantly praised for high intelligence suffers greatly when he fails an exam or some other intellectual pursuit believing that he wasn't smart after all. He feels helpless - his best source of recognition has vanished. Praising the child for great effort, can backfire also. When that child fails, he may believe that he just didn't try hard enough, whereas winning may have been out of his control. Self-esteem flourishes when parents are around to notice a child's significant success at the moment of the success.
3. **Parents projecting their idea of failure onto the child.** Aakarsh may like to play the harmonium, but his father wants Aakarsh to shine as a cricket player. To the father Aakarsh lack of interest in becoming a star player, may be considered a failure.
4. **Saying "It doesn't matter." is hurtful.** The failure is important to the child. It matters!
5. **Setting up your child for success.** Some parents help their child to avoid failure, direct them to a school curriculum, which they believe will be easy for the child or give privileges so that the child doesn't have to do all the work that is expected of his peers. The child may leave school with a diploma but may not be equipped for a job or the complications in life.
6. **Rewarding to make the child feel good.** Some parents compensate for the disappointment of failure by giving a sweet or a present. That practice doesn't teach the child to handle failure. Sometimes the parent has to say, "Life is like that. Some pains are damned awful. What can you do next?"
7. **Blaming the child or someone else.** Some parents are so involved with their child that they project their disappointment onto the child or someone else (coach, teacher) and pass the blame. This does not help the child come to terms with the failure and learn from the experience.

### Conclusion

Failure matters to children, but the hurtful and destructive ramifications of a failure need not be long-term. Goals should focus on what is desired for the future. Sometimes failure can't be avoided and children need to express their feelings. They need to be told that such things happen, that his feelings are understood, but that life goes on. Children can improve or learn character traits which enable them to flourish. Caregivers can help the child identify his/her strengths and help him/her employ them in positive ways.