



Supporting Your High-Achieving Teens to Succeed: Let Them fail!

By Nancy B. Hertzog, Ph.D.

your child walks out of the house and forgets his signed permission slip, her gym suit, or their musical instrument. What do you do? Do you drop everything and drive the important item to school, or do you say, “*Let them suffer the consequences*”? Such a hard decision! But many of us have had to do this more than once. Parenting is a tough job, but parenting young adolescents—even tougher! That’s because the teen brain isn’t fully developed. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, “the frontal cortex, the area of the brain that controls reasoning and helps us think before we act, develops later.”¹

As parents, we all want our children to thrive—and that means that we try to keep them from failing. This article describes a parent program connected to a book discussion of *The Gift of Failure* by Jessica Lahey that engages parents in conversations about the importance of sharing their own past failures with their children.

At the Robinson Center for Young Scholars, parent programming is an essential and concrete component to the holistic approach for supporting their children who have chosen to enter college early. The Center houses two early-entrance-to-college programs, as well as Saturday enrichment and summer programs, at the University of Washington. Monthly parent meetings are generally designed for parents of our early entrance students, and cover topics such as how to communicate with your young college student, the influence of social media, parental expectations, developing healthy relationships, and dealing with social media.

We incorporate shared book readings into our parent programming. In addition to *The Gift of Failure*, other books included *So You Want to Talk About Race*, by Ijeoma Oluo and *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by William Deresiewicz. Parent programs afford opportunities to spend time with each other, to share parents' questions and concerns, and to receive additional resources to support their children. In this way, parent programs go beyond providing "what they need to know to support their children into the realm of what they need to feel supported themselves."²

In this article, I share some of the responses from our parent meetings around our reading of Lahey's *The Gift of Failure* to encourage readers to engage in conversations with their children about their own growth processes, including the times when they felt failure. Very successful adults often have experienced a series of failures yet those are not what they usually share with their children. Instead,

their children are led to believe that they must achieve success without experiencing failure. Students report pressure from their parents who want them to be successful, often leading to mental health issues of anxiety and depression as well as strained relationships with their parents.³

We specifically chose Lahey's book because we sensed from our high-achieving students that they felt pressure from their parents to be successful in college. We were also inspired by the programs sponsored by the University of Washington (UW) Resiliency Lab that publicly shared failure resumes of successful faculty and administrators from across campus, including the failure resume of the UW Dean of Arts and Sciences. We wondered if we shared our own failure resumes with them, would they benefit from talking about their own failures?

After giving parents time to read the book *The Gift of Failure*, the Academic Lead Counselor (who is now the director of the two Early Entrance Programs at the Robinson Center) and I designed an evening to engage parents in conversations about recognizing the value of sharing their failures with their children. We designed a template for questions that asked them to think about their failures throughout their lifetimes—starting with when they were teens to the present. Our first brainstorming question was "What failures did you experience before you were 18, in high school or earlier?" Divided into small groups of 3-5, parents jotted their failures on large white sheets of paper and had time to discuss them with members of their group. They laughed at some of their responses:

- Failed high school classes: Math, Physics (x2), Philosophy
- Flunked Driver's Test
- Didn't try 6th grade math in 1st grade
- Lost Rotary scholarship to friends (learned something better might come later)
- Abandoned idea of med school (shouldn't have sold myself short)
- Failure to negotiate the curve (x2) – pay attention!

Creating a Failure Resume

Tina Seelig, the executive director of Stanford Technology Ventures Program posts on her website the rationale for encouraging all her students to create failure resumes:

- A failure resume is a quick way to demonstrate that failure is an important part of our learning process, especially when you're stretching your abilities, doing things the first time, or taking risks. We hire people who have experience not just because of their successes but also because of their failures.
- Failures increase the chance that you won't make the same mistake again. Failures are also a sign that you have taken on challenges that expand your skills. In fact, many successful people believe that if you aren't failing sometimes then you aren't taking enough risks. Additionally, it is pretty clear that the ratio of our successes and failure is pretty constant. So, if you want more successes, you are going to have to tolerate more failure along the way.¹

Endnote

- ¹ Selig, T. (n.d.). *Failure resume*. Stanford Technology Ventures Program. <https://stvp.stanford.edu/blog/tag/resume>

Notice that some of their recollections involved “failing” at school subjects or academic work, the same type of failure that their own children might currently be experiencing in college. Yet, the parents survived and were proof that they moved past their failures to lead successful and happy lives. The ability to talk about these types of failures with their children are opportunities for opening communication about how they are doing in their schoolwork without putting pressure on them to get 4.0s on everything, a goal that many high-achieving students have for their entire college career.

The second question asked them to list failures that they experienced in their 20s, in college, or in their early professional life. Here again, many of them listed failing a particular test, or subject in college, dropping out of a course or even college, and missing opportunities because they

were afraid of failing. These failures may all be relevant for their children to learn about since they are in college and may face the same challenges. If their children have opportunities to talk about their parents’ failures, they might also follow up by asking them how they got past these setbacks as well as their solutions to the problems that they saw as failures.

When we discussed their failures that they may have experienced in their 30s and beyond, parents shared personal stories, including being laid off from a job, or being rejected from a particular school. They also shared their perceptions of failures that related to relationships with friends, colleagues, or family members. These personal stories brought intimacy to the group as a whole and built group cohesiveness to our monthly parent meeting. Finally, when asked to brainstorm any additional failures that they’ve experi-

enced, some of them mentioned life skills such as cooking, cleaning, failing a driving test, or fear of failure itself. It is important for children to hear these aspects of their parents’ lives in which they struggled so they too can give themselves grace for having difficulty with portions of their life that they may struggle with outside of the academic domain.

In a *New York Times Smarter Living Newsletter*, Tim Herrera reiterates the importance of keeping track of your failures as well as your

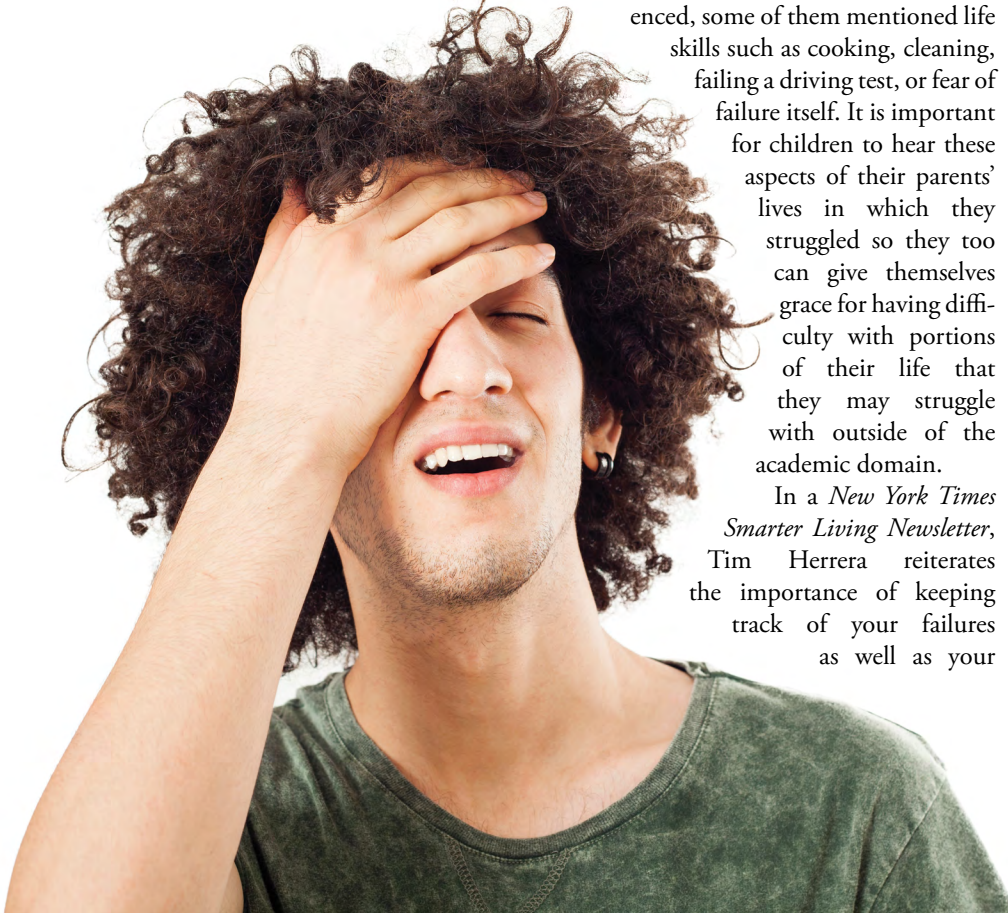
successes. He states, “*Because you learn much more from failure than success, and honestly analyzing one’s failures can lead to the type of introspection that helps us grow—as well as show that the path to success isn’t a straight line.*”⁴

Stopping to analyze what contributes to our failures is not something that we often tell our children to do. We generally try to brush off negative experiences (We want them to be happy!) and give encouragement for “*things will go better next time.*” But unless we understand what contributed to our failures, we are likely to make the same mistakes again.

When I work with teachers, I ask them to celebrate incorrect responses from students, because these are the ways in which we can document growth. If we can document a learning experience where they were incorrect, and then we teach them and subsequently they come to the correct conclusion or the response that is expected, we can see learning in action. We can see progress.

It is important that parents share with their children that learning and life is a process; that what may seem like a traumatic failure now (getting a C on a chemistry test, for example) will present them with an opportunity to learn and pave the way for different ways of studying for the next test. Of course, failures as I am describing them sound as if they only impact those who fail.

But we live among families and communities, and we may not be able to control the factors that led up to the failure—and we may not be able to find solutions for the next time. This too, should be shared with our children. Building tolerance and resiliency for life’s ups and downs is part of life—as a teenager and as an adult. Sharing with your children how you develop coping skills is an important part of supporting their growth. Learning self-care for the management of events in their future that you as a parent may not foresee is essential to their well-being. For a deeper discussion about managing failures, I encourage you to read Lahey’s book or the book review



that I wrote with my colleague who co-designed our parent sessions.⁹

We saw in the parent meetings how much parents enjoyed talking with each other to learn from one another and to gain the sense of relief that they were not the only parents going through difficulties with their children. Many of the parents who attended *The Gift of Failure* sessions had attended other monthly parent evening programs. Some were new. In follow-up questionnaires seeking their input for how well parent meetings met their needs, examples of their feedback follow:

"I always enjoy hearing from other people who have had similar experiences."

"Several discussion topics seemed like made just for my situation."

"Hearing about the experience of other families. Just getting together and feeling supported."

Parents may not always have access to parent groups that support each other going through different stages of raising their children. Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) is an organization that provides support particularly for families of children who have been identified as gifted or talented. They offer online support groups as well as in-person conferences and training for parents to be facilitators of their own groups.

Other opportunities for parents to form support groups may come from their local school gifted programs or through their state gifted and talented association. NAGC also has a Parent, Family & Community Network that is free for members to join. I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to connect with other parents and to access an abundance of resources on parenting identified gifted children.

Parents from the Robinson Center meetings show us the importance of opportunities to bring parents together to talk about their children—both their successes and failures as parents of young adolescents. Most importantly, our parent population is diverse in race, language, ethnicity, and religion. When we talk about



Reflection Questions for Thinking About Failure

What are your personal views about failure? Ponder the questions below, either by using them as a parent group discussion guide when reading *The Gift of Failure* by Jessica Lahey or by taking a moment for quiet self-reflection.

- Why do we as parents tend to want to gloss over the mistakes or failures of our children?
- When our children fail at something how does that make us feel? Why?
- Do we as parents feel that we are failures when our children fail?
- What can we as parents do to process our own feelings of failure or disappointment and turn it into a positive growth experience for our children?

It's Never Too Early to Share Struggles with Your Children

Most children from a very early age understand that their parents want them to be successful. They are often praised and rewarded for their achievements and successes. Students who have been identified as gifted and placed in gifted programs often feel pressure to perform at high levels based on their label. Carol Dweck cautions educators that students who have a fixed mindset about their intelligence avoid challenges for fear of failure.¹

Parents, therefore, should emphasize that failures are opportunities for growth, and should focus on praising their children for their *efforts* and not their *performance*. Strategies for parents of young children include talking through a problem out loud so that their children hear how they are coming to solutions or admitting to their children when they have made a mistake (a recipe gone wrong, for example). Giving their children insights into how they make corrections and recover from mistakes (e.g., lost keys, forgotten groceries) in their daily lives will put the focus on solving and learning from mistakes, rather than on stressing over them.

Endnote

- ¹ Dweck, C. (2018, April 12-13). *Mindsets, achievement and well-being in adolescence*. [Keynote presentation] Stanford ChildX 2018. Palo Alto, CA. childx.stanford.edu/videos.html

supporting their children as they proceed through the early entrance programs to college, they engage in conversations about their family values, traditions, and cultural ways of knowing and doing. These discussions provide learning opportunities not only for them, but for us as staff members and educators who strive to be supportive, responsive, and welcoming to our community members. ☀

Resources

- Deresiewicz, W. (2015). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. Free Press.
- Lahey, J. (2015). *The gift of failure: How the best parents learn to let go so their children can succeed*. Harper Collins.
- NAGC Parent, Family & Community Network. <https://nagc.org/page/networks-and-special-interest-groups>
- Oluo, I. (2029). *So you want to talk about race*. Seal Press.
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- University of Washington Resiliency Lab. <https://wellbeing.uw.edu/unit/resilience-lab>

Author's Note

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gifted programming. She currently serves on the NAGC Board as a member-at-large.

Author Appreciation

I am deeply appreciative of my colleague, Kathryn Grubbs, for her contributions to the content and the facilitation of the parent meetings. She was the co-collaborator in all aspects of parent programming, and the source of deep thinking about how we can always improve our work with parents to better serve the Robinson Center community.

Endnotes

- ¹ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (2017, September). *Teen brain: Behavior, problem solving, and decision making*. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Teen-Brain-Behavior-Problem-Solving-and-Decision-Making-095.aspx
- ² Academic Counselor, personal communication.
- ³ Hertzog, N. B., & Chung, R. U. (2015). Outcomes for students on a fast track to college: Early college entrance programs at the University of Washington. *Roeper Review*, 37(1), 39–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2014.976324>
- ⁴ Herrera, T. (2019, February 3). Do you keep a failure résumé? Here's why you should start. *The New York Times*. <https://nyti.ms/3KFVAf5>
- ⁵ Grubbs, K., & Hertzog, N. B. (2019). A gift that is hard to accept. *Roeper Review*, 41(3), 214–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2019.1622071>