



The Gift of Failure

I recently read “The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed.” I then had the pleasure of interviewing its Author, a mother of two boys and former teacher, Jessica Lahey for The Program podcast ([The Program Podcast with Jessica Lahey](#)). I recommend the book (and the podcast interview) to any parent, coach, teacher and/or business leader.

Throughout, Mrs. Lahey highlights what we can and should do to ensure that our children have happy, successful lives, however they may define one. To help ensure it, as leaders, we must stay focused, recognize, and reward their *behaviors* rather than simply “worship at the altar of their achievements.”

We must talk to our children about those behavioral standards that we determine are mission critical to their success and then recognize when our children meet and exceed those standards.



How we recognize their doing so is not just how we talk, but also, how we act (or react) not just when those behaviors lead to victory, but even more importantly, when those behaviors don't! As an example, if we say that "hard work and a positive attitude" are what is most important, do we still show our disappointment after a soccer game defeat, even though it was against a worthy opponent and our child did, in fact, work extremely hard and had a great attitude? If getting outside their comfort zone is what we value, how do we act when our child brings home a "B," in a really challenging class? If discipline and tenaciousness is what we say we value, are we recognizing it in our sales associates even when they fail to sign a large prospect or they fall short of their annual goal during an economic downturn?

Achievement matters, but on any battlefield, achievement is simply a byproduct of our standards of behavior. Even more so in the long term. The more we stay focused on great behaviors (hard work, tenacity, a positive attitude, toughness, courage, selflessness etc), the greater our performance is and the more consistent we can deliver it.

Have performance goals and be aware of them. They help you do well. They help you win *games*. Have behavior standards and stay fanatically focused on them. They ensure you do great. They ensure you compete for championships... in life.

The Program believes this. The Program teaches it. ***I believe this. I teach it.***

I have a nine-year old son, Axel. We never talk about performance. He has never heard me tell him to "get A's." He has never heard me tell him to "be a leader." If he talks about the touchdowns he scored, I will, of course talk to him about them, but only if he wants to do so and when we do so, I make sure to point out that I am happy *for him*. It is his behaviors during the practice or game that I stay focused and that I continuously draw his attention back to.

Have goals. Be aware of them. Stay focused on behaviors.

I believe this. I teach it.

Last week Wednesday, I realized that I was doing exactly the opposite...

Axel participates at Ultimate Obstacles (think American Ninja Warrior indoors). At the end of his Ninja practice last Wednesday night, he asked me, as he often does, to video him doing an obstacle; a 45' rope climb. He climbed it on the first try and I then showed him the video. I told him that I was going to send it to his grandparents and my Program teammates. He then asked me to video him doing a second obstacle; a race over and back three consecutive 6', 8' and 10'



walls. By the time he started, he had been doing various obstacles for more than an hour with his Ninja teammates. He was sweating profusely and bleeding from a cut on his knee. He gave absolutely everything he had, and on the final wall, he slipped and fell. He missed the record that he wanted to break by 2 seconds...

And I deleted the video...

What a hypocrite!

Show courage. Be tough and disciplined. Get outside your comfort zone. Do your best. Be tenacious... but if you don't get to the top of the mountain, win the game, score or the finish the obstacle, I delete the video...

I'm sorry, Axel. You deserve a better leader. So too all children whose Mom and Dad only hang on the refrigerator the tests that they score a 100. So too all the students whose teachers only tell them "good job," after their performance on that same test. So too all the athletes whose coaches are only happy after victories and upset after every defeat. So too all junior business associates whose boss only recognizes their performance.

As Jessica Lahey highlights, failure is truly a gift. But only if we, the parents, teachers, coaches and business leaders treat it as such. Failure does not teach us any great life lessons. Great parents, teachers, coaches and business leaders do. And failure, falling short, struggle provides us the opportunity to do so.

Or we can just keep deleting the video.

Don't.

Attack!

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