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Rewarding failure hinders personal growth

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Lack of discipline. Not paying attention to what one is doing. Unwillingness to listen, develop and grow. These are all ways of defeating ourselves before we even get out of the starting gate.

Life is our avenue to success. It can be an avenue with rays of sunlight, birds singing, smiles from friends or strangers, or a phone call from a special someone. All are signs along the roadside of our journey. They allow us to witness love, experience unconditional love and trust, and overcome doubts and fears. We learn to see more clearly that failure is a momentary status, to overcome with new direction and effort.

So why do we — especially parents — actively participate by giving praise and flattery when kids experience disappointment or failure?

Here's an example. It's a little league baseball game. The last inning, bases loaded, two outs, and your kid is up to bat. His team is behind by one run. Your son strikes out, game over.

He comes to you, buries his head in your chest, crying and says, "I'm horrible, I can't play this sport. I hate it." Your response, "No son, you're doing great. You're a star."



You are giving praise that does not match his performance, and it is definitely not what is needed in this instant. What is needed is a discussion about performance and how the child can improve. Inaccurate accolades may make him feel better, but do not help him understand how to improve his performance.

Parents do a disservice to their children when they try to raise self-esteem by praising failing efforts. This type of reinforcement encourages mediocrity and confuses the understanding of what it takes to be a good performer.

Rewarding failure with praise teaches the child that it is easier to quit an activity rather than persevere with practice and determination to improve performance. False praise teaches not to take risks, and to bow out when challenges become difficult.

Confidence is not built on success alone. Achievement is earned through perseverance, determination and hard work. Not giving up at the first obstacle is a growth moment. Confidence is built with each step forward, the movement to achievement. Failure can be a motivator, a push to practice skills that make a difference.

Parenting, coaching, or whatever it is called, is encouragement needed to pursue excellence. It is not false praise, but consists of pointing out what can be done to correct, advance and achieve new skill levels. Praise, worthy of the effort expended, provides supportive encouragement, not false hope.

Being present, supportive and encouraging are key components for any child's ability to deal with life challenges. When a child faces a challenge, ask, "How are you feeling about the situation?" Provide the child an opportunity and time to express his/her frustrations or fears. Emotions are irrational reactions, but do need to be expressed.

Once those feelings are out, avoid a placating statement like, "Don't feel that way!" Rather, reflect the behavior back. For example, "It's normal to feel that way. What do you think you can do that will help you feel better?" If the child reacts with "I want to quit," follow up with, "How do you think that will help?"

Questions like these will start a discussion. Keep your comments positive, and direct the child toward doing what can be done to improve personal advancement. Unproductive praise needs to be avoided. Though they may make the child feel better momentarily, their overall effectiveness is detrimental. Supportive and encouraging suggestions provide understanding and options.

Failure is a temporary condition. Learning from failure allows us to improve our coping skills. If we offer false praise, we block opportunities to deal with setbacks and failures, and restrict their abilities to manage and survive difficult situations. If children believe failure is not something they can learn

from, but see it as a defeated embarrassment, anxiety and worry are often the results.

How we talk with children is significant. How we talk with employees has the same significance. Helping them explore their thoughts and feelings by asking self-directed questions gets them focused on what they can do to manage.

This is important in early learning, as well as continuing education. Parents will not always be present to assist with challenges. Supervisors, managers, people with authority take on this task.

The goal is to enable people to focus on their efforts — "What can they do right now?" This teaches persistence and resourcefulness. An important message is: "If you fall down, get up. If you elect not to get up, you fail permanently."

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About the Author



Michael S. Haro, Ph.D., is a coach, behaviorist and training specialist. He taught at the University of Houston—Clear Lake, was a licensed psychologist in private practice, consulted and provided training to private, public and government organizations. In his 28-year career as a management consultant, Dr. Mike worked with organizations such as NASA, Entergy, Frontier Oil, Bank One, Shell, Monsanto and Raytheon, where he designed and implemented programs for behavior management, behavior safety, employee development, customer service and human error reduction training. Dr. Mike is now semi-retired. He still engages in coaching opportunities, primarily using telephone, Skype and FaceTime sessions. His goal is to continue serving others using "self-coaching", a process he developed.



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A horizontal banner with a green border. On the left is a stylized tree with orange and green leaves. The text "GRADE" is in orange and "GMADE" is in blue. On the right is another stylized tree with blue leaves. The main title "The Complete Reading and Math Diagnostic Assessment Solution" is in orange, and the tagline "Helping Students Grow by Understanding Their Unique Needs" is in a smaller, dark font.