

Gifted Challenges

"Beyond intellect: Exploring the social and emotional aspects of giftedness."

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A life lesson for gifted children: failure

Let your gifted child fail.

What?

Many parents of gifted children, hardened from years of advocacy, might bristle at the idea of allowing their child to fail. They have encouraged their children to fulfill their talents, to strive for their best, to take on new challenges. Passively accepting a failing grade or poor performance may seem alien.

But it's often the best life lesson a child can receive. And it's better if it comes early.

Why is it so important?

Gifted children are used to doing well, accomplishing what they want, rising to the top. Although some may struggle with learning disabilities or deficits in a few areas, most grasp learning with ease. Many coast along and rarely push themselves as a result. **We do them a disservice if they rarely face a challenge, if they never struggle, if they never fail.** We rob them of the opportunity to learn resilience.



What is resilience?

Simply put, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines resilience as "an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change." The American Psychological Association expands this definition to include both a process and a learned behavior. According to the APA, "Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity.... Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone."

When learning comes easily, tests are a breeze, and there is little challenge, children don't get to develop resiliency skills. Often this occurs when the curriculum is too slow or basic. The obvious solution is to ensure that gifted children receive an education that is stimulating and challenging. Other times, though, gifted children may avoid academically demanding situations because of their fear of failing. Not only do they deprive themselves of finally experiencing a true academic or creative challenge, they never get to flex their "resiliency muscles."

Some reasons gifted children avoid taking risks include:

- Perfectionism – Not all gifted children are perfectionists, but those who are feel compelled to produce a stellar performance or piece of work, even when others do not expect this. Perfectionists often avoid challenges when the outcome is uncertain or where they might perform poorly.

Gail Post, Ph.D.



Perspectives about giftedness from a clinical psychologist, advocate, consultant, and parent. For more information about Dr. Post, and about therapy and educational consultation services, see the About pages.



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- Heightened sensitivities – Highly sensitive and emotionally intense, many gifted individuals can overreact to even mild criticism. Comments intended to enhance growth may be perceived as overly harsh and taken as a global stamp of disapproval. Their sensitivity also may result in an avoidance of risk-taking.
- Defining self by ability – Some gifted children define themselves by their talents and abilities, and dread the possibility of failure. When consistently praised and recognized because of their talents, they can become overidentified with them, and believe that it is essential to maintain their standing as the “best” at what they do. If they fail, they may feel devastated, as their sense of identity can feel threatened.
- Previous failures in social situations – Sometimes introversion, asynchronous development, or having interests that differ from those of their peers may have contributed to uncomfortable social interactions that felt like failures. Some gifted children may retreat into their intellectual or artistic pursuits, and fear the thought of losing this refuge if they were to fail.

The experience of failure itself is not helpful. What matters is what the child learns from it.

Supportive encouragement to learn from the particular situation, challenge misconceptions about what occurred, and quickly move on can help children accept disappointment and develop resiliency. Resources for building resiliency in children are available in print and on the web, such as through the APA help center. Yet gifted children may have somewhat different needs.

What can you do to help your gifted child develop resiliency?

1. Encourage your child to take academic risks. Achievements are more satisfying when they initially seemed out of reach. Don't let your child settle for shortcuts, or lavish praise over accomplishments that come too easily. Urge schools to provide appropriate gifted education that truly challenges your child.
2. Distinguish between process and outcome – Offer an appreciation of how learning is a process involving uncertainty, excitement, confusion, and a range of unsolved mysteries. Your child's job is to take on challenges he or she has not already mastered. Let your child know that you care as much about how he or she approaches learning as what is produced.
3. Teach coping strategies – Help your child learn how to accept disappointment and loss without either blaming others or engaging in harsh self-criticism. Teach how to put adversity into perspective. Help your child learn to comfort, soothe, distract, seek support, and appropriately discharge feelings. (Note: Sometimes these skills may warrant support from a therapist.)
4. Emphasize values – Promote the importance of ethics and integrity, cooperation and collaborative work, and taking responsibility for one's role in the classroom. Let your child know that actions and behaviors speak more about character than accomplishments, and that how one behaves is more important than always being the best.

While most children find school to be reasonably demanding, gifted children frequently view academics as easy and even boring. Without a challenge, they may develop a distorted sense of their own abilities, a skewed perception of others' strengths, and a fear of taking risks when eventually faced with real challenges. Encouraging academic risk-taking at an early age, before fears and avoidance behaviors become entrenched, should help build confidence in their ability to master adversity and future challenges.

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