

Allowing your child to fail helps build resilience—here's what that looks like in practice

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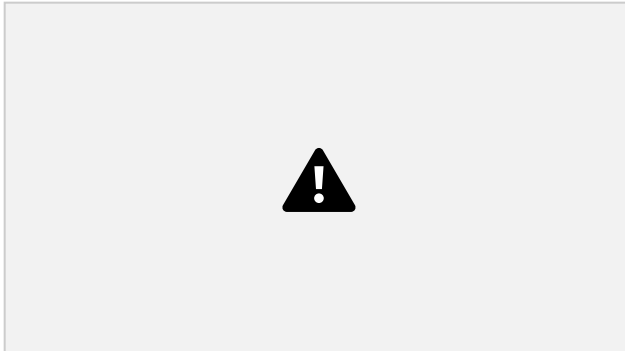


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Knowing when and how to help your child is one of the toughest challenges of parenting. Stepping in too quickly means they risk losing out on the chance to learn how to do things themselves, while stepping in too late can lead them to getting so frustrated that they give up altogether. And in either scenario, kids aren't learning the lessons they need.

“Parents are under so much pressure,” said Caroline Leaf, a neuroscientist and the author of [*How to Help Your Child Clean Up Their Mental Mess: A Guide to Building Resilience and Managing Mental Health*](#). “There’s a tendency to slip over into helicopter parenting at the sign of any tension.”

Instead, Leaf said, the solution is to practice “safety-net parenting”—where your child is allowed to fail in a structured environment. With safety-net parenting, kids get the opportunity to work through a number of problems, which helps them learn how to face challenges head-on, while still experiencing the safety of knowing that their parents will be there for them, in the event they find themselves hopelessly out of their depth. “That’s the kind of parenting that allows a child to recognize that they can make mistakes and it’s OK to fail,” Leaf said.

How to be a “safety-net parent”

As a parent, it can be an uncomfortable experience watching your kid fail at something or have them go through an extended period of struggling, whether it’s watching them forget their homework at home, or go through an extended fight with a friend. When this is happening and you find yourself

wanting to step in and help, Leaf's advice is to pause for a moment, and consider what your reasons are and what help you are planning to offer.

As Leaf suggested, ask yourself, "Am I trying to fix this, or am I trying to facilitate *them* learning to fix it themselves?" Facilitating your child can take the form of talking them through what is going on, and discussing ways of dealing with it, such as figuring out the best way to share toys with their sibling, or the most effective way to climb to the highest point on the playground. It can also be in the form of talking them through what steps they need to make sure they are prepared for school, or why their friend may be mad at them. "Get out of your mind that you are a fixer," Leaf said. Instead, the focus should be on helping your child figure out how to fix their own problems.

Although facilitating their problem-solving may feel less effective—and more time-consuming—in the long run, this is how they will eventually learn. "For a child to learn, they need to have it wired into the brain and the body," Leaf said. For this wiring to happen, your child needs to go through the messy process of figuring out how to get something done, which often means getting it wrong multiple times before finally getting it right. As much as you may want to jump in by dropping off their forgotten homework at school, or talking with their friend's parents about their latest squabble, fixing their problems for them isn't going to teach them the lessons they need to learn.

How to handle your emotions as a parent

One reason many of us find ourselves getting sucked into helicopter parenting, in spite of our best efforts, is that it can be incredibly uncomfortable watching our kids struggle. We want to help them, and we also want to ease their struggles. In the long run, fixing our kids' problems makes it harder for them—and for us. "Bubble wrapping a child makes them feel very frustrated and entitled at the same time," Leaf said. "That can actually stunt their mental development and growth, and as a result, kids can actually move backwards."

If you find yourself getting overly anxious or nervous watching your child fail, Leaf's advice is to be honest with them, in a developmentally appropriate way, about what feelings you are experiencing, and to let them in on what your own coping mechanisms are, such as by taking some deep breaths, pausing for a moment to collect your thoughts, or something else. In this way, you are letting them in on how you cope with your own emotions, which has the effect of modeling these strategies for them. "Kids are a lot more insightful than what we give them credit for," Leaf said. "They love authenticity