

“The Gift of Failure”

I had a great conversation recently with an alum parent; she has a college, high school and eighth grader. We were discussing education, life and our children. She made a comment that hit home to me. She said, “Colette, the best thing I ever did for my children was to loosen the cord between me and them. “ By so doing she said they are faring better as individuals, more accepting of their own limitations and capabilities and more resilient. In general, she told me they are less dependent on her and more and more comfortable in their own skin.

This was so apropos at that moment in time. I just returned from the American Montessori Society National conference where I listened to one of the keynote speakers speak on this very topic. Jessica Leahy author of *The Gift of Failure* is also an educator, speaker and parent. In her book she uses her teaching experiences and parenting style as a guide to help parents give the gift of failure to their children. This sounds daunting, I know, because of course every parent wants the best for their child, and no parent wants their child to fail. What happens along the parenting way, Ms. Leahy observes, is that parents can become misguided. Parents may look at their children’s successes or failures as a reflection on their parenting, and intervene accordingly. This can lead to overly involved, overly protective, and overly helpful parents. The ultimate result can lead to overly dependent children who have learned to be “helpless.”

What parents need to think about is how to develop resilient, self-confident, independent children who can make decisions and live with the consequences of their choices. After all, there is no greater lesson than learning from a mistake. Ms. Leahy cautions “failure averse” parents to keep in mind that when they try to “engineer failure” out of kids’ lives, kids feel incompetent, incapable, unworthy of trust and utterly dependent. They are, she argues, unprepared when “failures that happen out there, in the real world, carry far higher stakes.”

Her advice is not radical nor does it mean that parents have to relinquish parenting rights. Her reasoning aligns with Dr. Maria Montessori’s philosophy on supporting independent children. Like Montessori, Ms. Leahy believes in developing autonomy by guiding children toward, and allowing them to make, appropriate choices. Children who are trusted with responsibility and the opportunity to solve their own problems will be intrinsically motivated and have the skills necessary for later in life

Ultimately they will grow into resilient capable people who can make their way competently in the world. Ms. Leahy believes that between parents and teachers we can help children discover “intellectual bravery”, a love of learning and a resilience to grow into independent competent adults. She offers advice to parents on helping with offering help, praise, day to day responsibilities, friends, school, and sports, she supports not only parenting for today but also “parenting for tomorrow.”

I highly recommend this book.

Enjoy!

Colette

Ref: Leahy, Jessica. *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2015