

## **Preparing vs Protecting Children from Mistakes, Anxiety and Failure**

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**Myth:** Protecting my child from making mistakes and experiencing failure gives them the best chance of success in life. Helping my child avoid stressful situations that trigger anxiety, helps them to be comfortable and happy throughout their life.

**Truth:** Children need to be given the space to make mistakes and to experience failure, while at the same time having the support, encouragement and assistance in problem-solving from their parents when they fail. They need help tolerating difficult life events which helps them to understand that failure, making mistakes, and experiencing anxiety are all a normal part of life. Prior experience of failure gives children the opportunity to learn that they can handle challenging situations when they happen in the future.

### **Parenting to Protect vs Parenting to Prepare**

When children are first born, they are helpless and dependent on their parents to have all their needs met. In the role of parent, we quickly learn that our job is to give our children everything they need, and to do all that we can to protect them from harm. In these very early developmental years our job as parents is very much to protect our children. As children grow and mature, our role as parents begins to shift while our children are afforded increasing freedom. There is always a fine balance between “parenting to protect” and “parenting to prepare”. Protecting our children and preparing our children are both very important. As children get older the best way we can protect our children is to prepare them for the eventual mistakes, failures and disappointments they will inevitably experience in adulthood. Adolescent children need to know that we believe they are capable of making decisions and of managing difficult situations. They need to know that we are there for support, but we will not over-protect them. The ultimate goal of parenting is that when the time comes for our children to leave home, they are prepared to face whatever life brings them, as we will no longer be there to protect them from harm and failure. Children need to have stumbled and learned how to pick themselves back up, dust themselves off, and try again.

### **Desire to Help our Children Succeed**

In wanting the best for their children, parents often think their job is to help their children succeed. As parents we feel a lot of pressure to help our children experience success and be happy, and as a result there is a temptation to over-parent. We worry that if our children experience failure, this will have a negative impact on their self-esteem. With

good intentions, we are tempted to rush in and fix things so our children won't be anxious or upset.

### **What the Research Tells Us**

The research tells us that it's important for children to experience some adversity. Shielding children from the reality of the human condition, that mistakes and failure are normal life experiences, is a disservice to them. Allowing children to experience anxiety, pain and failure, means they will be more prepared when they have these experiences as adults. Children will develop increased independence, self-confidence and increased self-efficacy if parents can prepare them for the inevitable challenges in life, rather than protect them from all disappointment, pain and anxiety.

### **What Happens to Anxiety when Parents Rescue their Children?**

Parents inadvertently make anxiety worse when they protect their children from upsetting things. Parents need to understand that rescuing children from their anxiety only increases anxiety, as the child learns that they need to avoid anxiety-provoking situations, and that they need their parents there to rescue them every time. When parents encourage their children to tolerate anxiety, children are able to feel more confident in their ability to manage anxiety in the future.

### **Struggles Teach Children What they can Manage**

When children experience failure and they come through this okay, they become more resilient to eventual disappointment and failure that is very likely to come in the future as an adult. Overcoming obstacles builds resilience and confidence in their own abilities. The term 'distress tolerance' refers to people's ability to manage difficult situations. When children have low distress tolerance, they become easily overwhelmed and don't believe they can manage challenging situations on their own. Dealing with small amounts of distress at a time results in an increased capacity for coping. Children develop resilience when they have been through something difficult. The next time they experience adversity, they are able to tell themselves "I have been through this, I know how to deal with it". Parents would benefit from thinking about whether they want to see their children struggle and fail now while they are still living at home, where parents can help support and guide them through uncomfortable emotions related to this; or if they would rather their children experience failure and anxiety for the first time as adults who have moved away from home. While children are still at home parents can scaffold independence by giving their children the responsibility of doing things on their own while at the same time being there for them when they fail.

## The Benefits of Letting Children Fail and Experience Anxiety

When parents over-protect, they unintentionally send the message to their children “I don’t think you are capable of handling this on your own”. When parents foster their children’s independence, they develop increasing self-worth and a sense of self-efficacy. There is no doubt that it is hard for parents to let children go and stumble, but in doing so, children begin to develop a healthy self-esteem when they are able to persevere through anxiety, failure and disappointment. When children are given the opportunity to take risks and make mistakes, they become resilient, strong and confident young people.

### What Parents Can Do to Help:

- **Show empathy** for your child’s experience rather than agreeing with their fears.
- **Help your child investigate the actual “facts”** of a situation
- **Model healthy ways to manage anxiety**, as children are always watching and learning from their parents’ actions and behaviors.
- Know that **the goal is never to eliminate anxiety, but rather help a child reduce, and tolerate anxiety**. Communicate this message to your child, as often children want to completely eliminate all anxiety. A little bit of anxiety helps us to be aware of danger and to keep ourselves safe.
- The same can be said for mistakes, **the goal is not to eliminate mistakes and failure but instead to help children navigate through the disappointment, sadness and frustration they feel as a result of failure, and to help them set themselves up for greater success in the future**.
- **Listen to and validate your children’s uncomfortable feelings** as they manage upsetting experiences. Parents may want to “fix things” when their child is experiencing uncomfortable emotions, but the most helpful thing they can do is to listen and validate their feelings.
- **Sit down with your child and help them problem solve** how to manage challenging situations when they arise, as this prepares them for more independence the next time they make a mistake or experience failure.

### Summary

Parenting is a learning process and we all do our best to give our children the best support we know how to give. Sometimes we can over-parent our children in an effort to protect them and keep them safe from anxiety, failures and harm. There is a fine

balance that we need to hold between “parenting to protect” and “parenting to prepare” our children for the future. One way that we can monitor ourselves as parents is to check in with ourselves about our own feelings when supporting our children. The question we might ask ourselves as parents is: “Am I doing this for my child out of fear that they might experience disappointment, anxiety or failure?” If I am parenting from a place of fear, then I am parenting to protect, and is that what my child needs most right now as I prepare them for the future?

## **Resources**

### **Websites:**

<https://soloparent.org/blog/2022/03/13/the-great-paradox-of-parenting-protecting-vs-preparing>

<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/are-you-protecting-your-kids-from-reality-or-preparing-them-for-life/>

<https://parentandteen.com/protect-teens-preparation-is-protection/>

<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/when-does-protecting-your-kids-become-over-parenting-0909144>

<https://childmind.org/article/whats-wrong-with-helicopter-parenting/>

<https://childmind.org/article/preparing-for-college-emotionally-not-just-academically/>  
<https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious/>

<https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-learn-to-fail/>

### **Books:**

Lahey, J. (2016). *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go so their Children can Succeed*. HarperCollins.

Wilson, R. & Lyons, L. (2013). *Anxious Kids Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous & Independent Children*. Health Communications Inc.