

Learning From Failures and Falls

Kathleen Carroll Giles, Head of School, Middlesex School

I was running some errands last weekend along a busy suburban road, and as an inveterate (and involuntary) reader, I found myself noticing not only the plethora of garage sale signs that sprung up over the weekend, but also several advertising signs new to my eyes. “Playground falls can lead to lifelong injury,” warns the sign out in front of an acupuncture office. “Grades too low? Get help before exams!” exhorts a sign 50 or so yards down the road, posted in front of a franchised tutoring business. “Fill the gaps and get ahead!” extols a brightly-colored sign, yet another 100 yards down the street, as it sits in front of a math store, which in its windows advertises SAT and ACT test prep as well as robotics and “math fun for all ages.”

As I pulled into Dunkin’ Donuts to try out the Snickerdoodle Macchiato, hoping I could order one with a straight face (just try to say that phrase ten times fast—it’s irresistible), I was struck again by the power of advertising suggestion in our lives and by the visceral response it provokes, from a desire to sample an exotic coffee drink to the suggestion that my child needs special support to compete (or stay ahead) to the reflexively-guilty idea that, because I didn’t seek therapeutic attention for every playground or soccer field injury my kids sustained over my now twenty-eight years of parenting, they might be scarred for life—or worse, they missed the opportunity to fulfill their true potential. That was a lot of suggestion in a very short span of roadway, and largely suggestions designed to provoke or at least appeal to anxiety about parenting—not just to the anxiety of parents, but to anxiety about our choices (and responsibilities and duties and shortcomings) as parents. I’m sure that the teenagers driving the car directly behind mine had a very different emotional response to those signs—and thank goodness they did.

Prepare the Child, Not the Path

Anxiety is a pervasive response to the world in which we live right now; in fact, one might even argue that it is a reasonable response. The recurring personal and professional question for me is, what is reasonable in a time of high anxiety? Right below the surface of all of these appeals to parental responsibility is the idea that we, as parents, can control everything about our children’s lives, including what happens to them on the playground, on the SAT, and on math tests—and that we should try to exert that control or risk failing our kids, leaving them vulnerable to long-term negative consequences,

leaving them behind while other children get ahead. Did those childhood vaccinations hurt my child? Did not feeding her strawberries, eggs or milk in that first year set her up for allergies later on? Did the iPhone enter his life too soon? Did not pushing hard enough—or pushing too hard—on math class placement result in a transcript that was not what it should have been? (Question: What *should* it have been?)

Carried to an extreme—and there are no known limits to the creative forms parental anxiety can assume—this suggestion of controlled cause-and-effect in our parenting results in a “prepare-the-path-for-the-child” mentality that creates constant no-win situations for families. The path simply doesn’t respond as we would like. In both the short and the long run, preparing the *child* for the path is the only way to make sure that when trouble hits, as it will in even the most sheltered life, the child can cope without falling apart—and even better, can find within him or herself the courage, optimism and confidence to strategize, commit and work to resolve the trouble or at least, adjust as necessary. Not learning these skills results in the kinds of personal disability in a complex adult world that no amount of acupuncture—or any other outside intervention, for that matter—can resolve. And yet the allure of wanting to believe that we can flip the switch, solve the problem, and “tutor up” is so strong that phenomena like the film *Race to Nowhere* come and go and we forget that indeed, as parents, we are the drivers.

Too Much Information

What does it mean to be a parent in 2017? Probably the common denominator for all of us is that we live immersed in a culture of high-investment, high-anxiety, high-stakes processes, and our lives are infused with the FOMO (fear of missing out) induced by 24/7 access to information that exhausts us. The title of a recent self-help book, *Smarter Faster Better*, strikes me as an apt description for the attitude behind the way we approach our children’s lives as well as our own. Competitive parenting could be a professional sport; the kind of information shared on sidelines and at class coffees can challenge the most confident and centered of adults. And we know so much more about children than we used to—about the plasticity and developmental phases their brains go through; about learning styles; about social and emotional needs and development; and about the vast, unpredictable, constantly changing, and yes, often dangerous world into which we are bringing them. We also know what everyone else is doing—Facebook and Instagram and all of the other social media networks bring us the thrill and agony of constant connection, constant comparison, constant judgment. None of this FOMO is new, of course, but it is new in its intensity, and new in the fact that it

is also part of our children's lives from the time they are old enough to scroll and click. And a big part of this intensity is our newly-insatiable appetite for information and access.

It's hard to know which came first, the demand or the opportunity, but parents these days can be completely immersed in watching their children, even when other adults are responsible for them. During a meeting on our campus about an upcoming event, a local mother pulled out her cell phone to show me her child's daily schedule at a different boarding school, including the teachers' names, the school floor plans, and the meal menus. "I know where he is and what he is doing every moment of every day," she assured me with proud fatigue. I wondered at the difference between the mother who puts a child on the bus and then goes about the business of the day, assured that the child is at school doing his or her thing, and this mother whose energy is spent keeping track of the intimacies of her child's movements and eating at school, all done in a different state under the watchful eyes of many teachers. It hardly seems reasonable for her to spend her energy in this way—and yet, the access is there and the pressure is on. When I asked her whether she thought that kind of access helped her, she wasn't sure—but she was sure that she couldn't turn it off.

A similar issue arose during a discussion of online gradebooks, which my school has resisted and will continue to resist. There is no better way to increase anxiety and emphasize only achievement, rather than actual learning or growth, than by focusing parents' attention on the day-to-day grades a child receives. Grades do not always represent progress or growth; focusing only on those numbers is a kind of drip-torture for everyone involved as parents feel expected to monitor every grade, every day, even though every teacher I know asks his or her students not to behave that way. Here's where the "who is driving in The Race to Nowhere" question becomes very important to parents and to children. Children infer values from where their parents invest attention; to have daily attention focused on grades sends the unequivocal message, no matter what else we say, that grades are the top priority. However, there is enormous value in teaching a child to become a reliable reporter, and for that expectation of honesty, candor and trust to form the backbone of the child's character. Whether it is a fear that a child can't grow into this expectation, or a parent's need to feel "involved," the message the online gradebook sends to the child is that grades matter most and the child is relieved of responsibility for being a reliable reporter—whether the parents can't trust the child or because the child can't be trusted with the responsibility, the message to the child is the same.

In talking recently with a parent about a high schooler's inability to seek help from teachers and tendency to hysterics when her parents want to discuss her grades, the parent almost apologetically told me that this child certainly

needed to develop these skills but that the parent had played the role of problem-solver and strategist/interpreter until this point, with all data points coming from the online gradebook and never from the child, and that it was past time for the child, now approaching the junior year of high school, to take on these responsibilities and learn these skills. It can seem easy for parents to do this work for their children, both as a support and as a means of getting correct information; however, is it reasonable to track every homework and every quiz throughout a child's educational career? I sometimes wonder what an online gradebook would look like in the life of an adult—a businessperson, a professional, a parent. The practice of making everything in our lives high stakes deserves careful scrutiny before we adopt it.

Good Intentions, Unintended Consequences

The “what is reasonable” question inevitably is intertwined in hopes and dreams and good intentions and real and deep love for our children. It is reasonable to want the best; it is not reasonable to need the child to be the best. One of the most difficult conversations I have had with a parent took place during an advising conference, when one of my sophomore advisees was struggling with chemistry, the subjunctive, and algebra II (a standard struggle trifecta for sophomores, in my experience, as the old ways of memorizing-to-win fail and new ways of learning need to be developed). The child's father, a self-made man who had high aspirations for this talented-but-not-genius-material daughter, tossed the grade report on the table and told me, “All I want is for her to do her best, every day. Just her best. This isn't her best. She needs to do better.” The way he lumped those ideas together struck me hard—how could he know that she wasn't doing “*just* her best”? Do numbers measure that? This was a lovely, talented girl trying to manage the outsized life her parents, through the best intentions and incredible love for her, had devised: voice lessons to make the audition chorus; club sports to be recruited as a college athlete; more AP courses than advised, to make her academic program top-tier competitive; community service and summer internships scheduled around recruiting tournaments; online courses in computer programming, to be “that girl” who loves coding; even an online business to develop and display her entrepreneurial skills. She was chronically and categorically overwhelmed, and it was reasonable for her to feel that way. How could a teenager possibly do her best with all of that to do?

Very few adults can claim that we do our best, day in and day out, with no bad days, missteps, or downtimes. Most of us go through periods when we actually need to learn—to change how we think and work to adjust to new challenges, which is the essence of learning anything. And while we

are learning, we are vulnerable to mistakes or low scores—and isn't that the flip side of learning resilience, grit and everything else we know to be important for people to live successful and satisfying lives? It is clear how the pressure to be “the best” affects our children. We in schools are seeing big increases in the fragility of children, manifested by poor emotional and psychological health, that mirror the fragility and anxiety of their parents. Smarter, faster, better ... *exhausted*. Apples don't fall far from trees.

Not Fixing It All

The ultimate irony in parenting is, of course, that we devote our resources and energy for years to our children to prepare them to leave us, to build their own lives, to become independent and responsible decision-makers and actors. “This is what is supposed to happen,” my husband tells me as our now young adult children make vacation plans that don't include us and tell us after the fact, at times, about big life decisions. It is so important to learn the skill of separating what is happening to us with what is happening to them. We can't love parenting so much that it is more about us than about our children, and we can't love their achievement more than we love them. And this truth is hard; most of us love being parents, love feeling needed and love the ways children create connection and purpose and motivation. They give us a unique role to play, a cause to champion, a reason. And yet, it is important to be *reasonable*.

There is a certain heartbreak a parent feels when a date to the prom does not materialize; when a coveted role in the musical goes to another actor; when a loss sits squarely on the mistake a young player is likely to make under pressure; when the “deny” email arrives, even if it is not really a surprise; when our child feels excluded, unsuccessful, frustrated, disappointed. It's hard not to make those feelings our own and want to act to fix them, and the converse is absolutely true, as well—it's hard not to pass along our frustration and disappointment to our children. We want to “fix” it all; we want to be able to control the child's environment to his or her advantage; and we want him or her to be happy, upbeat, confident, optimistic. And yet, we as parents know that independence and responsibility need to become part of our children's individual selves in order for them to feel that their lives are worthy and have purpose despite those disappointments. “Smarter, faster, better” often has little to do with building a purposeful, ethical, connected, satisfying life. Turning our attention away from the tutor-fix, for example, and directing it instead toward the learning process is a step towards that healthy, whole person that is a reasonable parent's goal even in a time of high anxiety. It isn't so much about experiencing failure as it is about our children becoming strong enough to cope with disappointment, setbacks, frustration and anxiety as they build their lives.

Failure can be crushing; but keeping a reasonable definition of failure is critically important (failing to make high honors but making honors isn't really failure, is it?), and a failure to meet unreasonable expectations can't honestly be counted as a growth experience for a child. Likewise, we must keep our expectations reasonable—that our child may have a bad day or even a string of them; that disappointments might sting or hurt but the child (and we) can move forward; that growing up is a process, not a scheduled event; that moment-by-moment vigilance is good for neither parent nor child; and that just as children must learn to walk by themselves, they also must learn to navigate the world, and the strength and balance they need will not happen if parental hands are always holding them up. As one of my colleagues says of our students, “They need to be able to make little mistakes now so that they don't make big mistakes later,” and we as parents need to do the work of containing our FOMO and other anxieties to give our children the space and oxygen they need to do the work of learning to do hard things well.

Lessons From the Playground

Back in the car, coffee curiosity sated, I drove back to campus reflecting on the many possible interpretations of the “playground falls can lead to lifelong injury” sign. As an English teacher, I am always attuned to metaphor, and metaphorical possibilities abound. Even in a time of high anxiety, it is reasonable to bring children to the playground, stand back (without reverting to our phones), and let them play. They learn so many valuable lessons on playgrounds—in games with inconsistent and maybe even unfair rules that change just because the bigger kids say so; in games when people cheat; in resolving squabbles without turning them into fights; in taking turns on the swings; in being willing to push others; in getting out of the range of the swingers' legs; in waiting past the end of someone's turn; in swinging so high that, for that one scary, exhilarating moment when the swing chains give, they think they might fall off but instead learn not to panic but to hold on and ride the beautiful curve. They learn not to stand up at the top of a slide but, instead, to tuck and swing their legs to the front, to jump off on their feet at the bottom instead of falling to the ground. These kinds of lessons have to do with coming to a socio-emotional understanding as well as a physical understanding of one's self and one's relationship with others and with gravity as a fact and force. Those are critical understandings in a confusing world.

As parents, we can set the safety boundaries, exercise reasonable vigilance, and expect some cuts and scrapes. Sometimes kids break legs and arms on playgrounds, but most of the time, they don't. Those falls can be OK for kids and need to be OK for parents, as well. And as parents, we

need to take a deep breath, heed our children's needs to learn and grow separate from us, and not let the scary signs (and scary stories) keep our kids away from the playgrounds they need to experience, whatever shape and form those playgrounds might take. Because while the rare and isolated playground fall might result in lifelong injury, playgrounds mostly teach us an awful lot that is important and even wonderful about life.

Kathleen Carroll Giles is Head of School at Middlesex School, a 9th through 12th grade boarding and day school in Concord, Massachusetts.

This article first appeared in the 2017 issue of *Parents League Review*.
© 2017 Parents League of New York www.parentsleague.org.