

# Teaching Kids to Learn from Failure

By Deborah Skolnik

No one wants their kids experience failure, but it's one of the most important life lessons you can teach them. Here's why, and how to teach failure gracefully

You've coddled, cuddled, and cooed. Now it's time to let your kid get his first hard knocks—here's why it's actually the kindest thing you can do.

**What's the F word you're always shielding your child from?** Well...OK, yeah, that one, for starters. (And boy, you came up with it quickly—how much *Jersey Shore* do you watch, anyway?) But actually, we're thinking of a different F word right now: “failure.” Because what's more important than protecting your little one from situations in which he feels he doesn't measure up?

Turns out there *is* something more important—and that's to go ahead and let him experience a letdown or two. Yes, believe it or not, a little bit of defeat can be a stepping-stone to triumph. “Think of the things you learn when you encounter and move beyond failure,” observes child psychologist Rahil Briggs, Psy.D., director of the Healthy Steps program at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx, NY. “You learn how to tolerate frustration, how to get creative and take different approaches to tasks, and also how to ask for help—all things that are necessary for long-term success in life.”

If that's true, why do so many of us try to eliminate failure from our kids' adventures? Ashley Merryman, coauthor of *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*, says it's because we have the mistaken idea “that children are very fragile and that any bad outcome they experience, no matter how big or small, could damage their developing self-esteem.” But, she adds, “science has proven that it's just not true. Achievement builds self-esteem, not the other way around.” The takeaway: Bring on the fallen block towers and food spills! The scenarios that follow are ones you're sure to come up against. Here's how to handle them with aplomb when you do.

## Fed Up

You've got a toddler? Oh yeah, Mama, you're gonna have some feeding fails, like the ones that sometimes happen at Goldina Erowele's house. “My husband and I will gather around our table with our eight-year-old twin girls and our two-year-old, Chizara, for a breakfast of oatmeal,” says Erowele, of Missouri City, TX. But Chizara can sometimes find the meal, well, grueling: “She gets frustrated

with trying to scoop her oatmeal. She'll aim for her mouth, but then she'll fumble and it will go all over her," Erowele says.

**From hot mess to success:** "My husband is a softie, and he'll try to help the baby," Erowele says. "But I'm not as fast to rescue her. I say, 'It's OK, Chizara! You can do it! Try again!' I noticed that just this past Saturday, she had a little bit more confidence."

**Extra tips from the experts:** By being a cheerleader—not a feeder—Erowele's on the right track, says Robert Epstein, Ph.D., a research psychologist who's studied success and failure extensively. "You want to be supportive without rushing to do everything for her, since this is a task she can only learn through trial and error." Of course, you don't want your child to go hungry either, adds Renée Leff, an Encino, CA—based marriage and family therapist who specializes in infant-child mental health. "If she really isn't getting much into her mouth, and is becoming very distressed after a few minutes of trying, it's time to help her guide the spoon or to switch to another food like dried cereal that she can pick up with her fingers," she says.

No matter what, expect a mess. Don't fuss over the splashes and splatters: "Your child will absorb your expectations [if not the oatmeal]," Leff warns. Keep encouraging her, and eventually she'll feed herself flawlessly—or at least as well as your Great-Uncle Sydney.

### **Big Sibs, Big Inferiority Complex**

Nico Botticelli of San Diego is 2 years old, but wants to do all the same things as his 4-year-old brothers, Gabriel and Reese. "He'll try to climb on their bikes, then he's sad because he can't reach the pedals. Or do a puzzle with them, but can't make the pieces fit. When he realizes he can't keep up, sometimes he'll cry and stomp his feet and shout 'I DO IT!'" says his mom, Lauren.

**From hot mess to success:** Botticelli does her best to provide toddler versions of things the big bros like—say, a ride-on toy for Nico to enjoy while Gabriel and Reese are biking. She'll also sometimes adjust their schedule so he won't feel as overwhelmed: "I'll say to his brothers, 'OK, guys, let's do something that all of us like till Nico's nap,'" she says. She also makes a point of letting Nico practice puzzles and other skills while his sibs are in preschool: "Sometimes it's easier for him to try when they're not around," Botticelli says. "Sometimes they'll say 'You're too little to do this!' and then he gets discouraged."

**Extra tips from the experts:** It's smart of Botticelli to give Nico opportunities to attempt new stuff without his big brothers refereeing. "Older siblings will sometimes assume a parentlike role, telling the younger child what he can or can't do, or doing it for him. When that happens, it's fine to say 'I'm the mom, let me handle this,'" says Briggs.

When Botticelli makes mistakes of her own, she can model how to handle them in stride, too (“Oops, I just dropped my ice cream cone!”). “The key is to normalize failure so your child knows he’s not the only one who doesn’t get things right on the first try,” Epstein says.

### **Less Than Letter-Perfect**

Madeline O'Malley, 4, of Rockaway, NJ, knows all about failure, from A to Z. Actually, one letter is getting her down. “They’re practicing writing in preschool, but Maddie can’t make an ‘X,’” says her mom, Cate. “Her lines are wiggly or won’t cross properly. Maddie gets really worked up.”

***From hot mess to success:*** O'Malley reminds Maddie how far she's come. “I tell her ‘Just think, last year you couldn’t write your whole name, and now you can. Give it a little more time and I am sure you will be able to make an X, too!’” O'Malley has also drawn an X and put a piece of tracing paper on top of it to give Maddie a template.

***“Show your child that he’s not the only one who doesn’t get things right on the first try.”***

***Extra tips from the experts:*** Maddie's mom is doing a super job of boosting her confidence, Leff says. What would also help, she adds, “is to simply tell her ‘You know what? That might be too hard or you right now, honey,’” she says. If Maddie still wants to practice, she and her mom could make a single X together with a thick marker. Then Maddie could put glue on it and sprinkle it with glitter. Another option—make a connect-the-dots X for Maddie to finish.

### **Losin' It**

Connor Gouge, 5, of Holly Springs, NC, totally digs playing the card game UNO—until someone beats him. “He can get sad or sometimes even have a tantrum,” notes his mom, Irene. That’s a scenario many parents know well.

***From hot mess to success:*** Gouge never stacks the deck in Connor's favor. Instead, before she deals the cards, she strikes a deal: “I say we’ll play three games no matter who wins or loses, as long as there’s no whining. If he whines after losing a round, then it ends all play and we try again after a fifteen-minute cooldown. I tell him ‘I love playing with you and spending time together. If you win, I’m happy, and if I win, I’m happy. It’s just for fun!’”

***Extra tips from the experts:*** It's fine to halt the play due to tantrums. Just don't tell your child not to have one: “At this young age, they simply don't quite have the coping skills. They give really strong, honest, emotional reactions,” says Briggs. And while rigging games isn't cool, consider giving little kids a few extra points at the outset, or the occasional do-over, if there's no way they could win in a

fair match, recommends Leff. She also suggests not picking up with the same game after a tantrum. Instead, try a different, non-competitive activity, such as coloring.

“At the end of playing UNO, as long as Connor's at all able to, we always shake hands and tell each other ‘Good game,’” adds Gouge. Good sportsmanship is something that never fails to help a child—or adult—in the long run.

<http://www.parenting.com/article/learning-failure>