

A Gift That Is Hard to Accept

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BOOK REVIEW

Sakhavat Mammadov, *Book Review Section Editor*

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Lahey, J. (2016). *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

When you're talking to your high achieving teenage daughter about getting a C on her pre-calculus test, the last thing you want to do is tell her what a "gift" she's received because she didn't do as well as she expected. Although the author of the book *The Gift of Failure*, Jessica Lahey, makes a strong case to parents that they should allow their children to "fail" because it will make them better at being adults, it is a difficult message to swallow – especially when you as a parent empathize with your children. We chose this book to discuss with parents of children in our early entrance to college programs, as part of our monthly parent programming. Most of these students chose to come to college early because they have experienced high-academic success, and they were looking for a more challenging environment. Their parents are not used to helping them when they experience academic failures. By choosing a challenging learning environment, they were walking into almost sure failure – at something! Not only were they going to experience challenging college courses, but they were also entering an adult college world: parents could not speak with their professors, they could choose their own courses and make their own social plans, cook their own food, and determine how they would manage their time. We wanted to engage our parents in discussions that would help them feel better about grades other than straight A's, and give them some support about their children becoming more independent, especially at an earlier age because they were entering this college environment. We hoped that through our communal conversations, our parents would be less anxious about their children's achievement, and place less stress on their children who have predominantly been praised and rewarded for their successes.

The Gift of Failure is divided into three sections: Section I: Failure: A most valuable parenting tool; Section II: Learning from failure: Teaching kids to turn mistakes into success, and Section III: Succeeding at school: Learning

from failure is a team effort. The first section talks about the history of American parenting, albeit through a white, educated, middle-class lens, by using references or associations of family life found in *Little House on the Prairie*, Colonial New England, and books by Dr. Benjamin Spock. The author also discusses the value of growth moving from parental dependence to personal autonomy as best practice for helping kids find their own successes.

In the second section, the author focuses on specific developmental stages and examines opportunities for developing self-efficacy in relation to chores, friends, sports, and academics. Although the framing of the first section provides the context for seeing failure as inevitable and valuable, in the developmental section, Lahey presents many examples and strategies that she employed with her own children or that had been reported to her by parents of her students. She discusses the idea that as children grow into adolescence and become more independent, the opportunities for failure increase as the consequences become more severe. Parents may feel a stronger need to protect or intervene, or if they're able to allow their children to fail, they may feel more culpable for consequences.

The final section concludes with specific thoughts on how to make the most of parent-teacher partnerships, helping students benefit from homework and grades, as well as an ending reflection by the author. A real highlight of Lahey's writing is her willingness to admit her own mistakes and to share examples of what has and hasn't worked from her own life experiences. The parting message from the author is acknowledging how difficult it can be to allow our children to fail. In particular, living with the ambiguity of not knowing how your children will respond to life's challenges is a reality that all parents face.

Our book discussion, held over 2 months, accomplished our objectives: It opened up conversations about the value of struggling on one's own, the importance of natural consequences (missed classes because they can't wake themselves up on time), and navigating one's social relationships without adults playing interference. Since our students go to college at 15 and 16, the chapters titled, "Middle School: Prime Time for Failure" and "High School and Beyond: Toward Real

Independence” were most salient for our group. Particularly the middle school chapter put adolescence and decision-making into a typical development perspective. Our children at that age do not make the wisest decisions, and it is definitely the age where they seek distance from their loving parents, which can then become a concern. Parents in our group shared that they don’t want to lose the control of knowing who their children are with, what they’re doing, and how well they are navigating their friendships. Some of our parents whose teenagers have been in college for three years (and are still living at home) admitted that they still wake their children up in the morning because they fear that their children will miss class if they don’t. The redundancy of the message about giving your children opportunities to fail comes with an invitation to make changes in your parenting skills — changes that value autonomy, choice, and independence in actions. In order to be a true believer in the message of this book, you have to value giving your children autonomy, and truly understand that they build confidence by getting themselves out of their own sticky or *failure*-like situations. The author encapsulates this message with the following quote:

A mother of three explained her supportive autonomy strategy this way: ‘if you knew there was something that could help your child, that could give them ‘tools’ to help them later in life, could help them face the future with more strength, maturity to face life’s challenges, wouldn’t you do it?’ (Lahey, 2016, p. 187)

A cultural lens?

Lahey’s perspective on giving students choices, and supporting their choices may be true for the populations of students she has taught in the past, and for the parents who shared their stories with her. Lahey concludes the High School chapter with the following summary:

Give your child the opportunity to succeed. Send him to college with a first aid kit and some emergency cash, and a confidence in all the things he will learn. Let him have the freedom to create the person he wants to be and understand the paths and influences he does not want to follow. (Lahey, p. 176)

But our parents are diverse, and represent various perspectives on child rearing. They are parenting through the lenses of immigrants or children of immigrants. What the book does not discuss are challenges faced by students who have external conditions (not just parents) that may limit their choices. They may not have the financial resources to choose college, or to study abroad, or choose mentors or internships if they are working while going to school, or caring for a relative, or if they are undocumented. All high schoolers may not have the same choices as those presumed by the author. Parents in our book discussion shared some of their cultural perspectives on child-rearing, and

had different points of view from each other on how they would react to various situations. We encourage readers of this book to not only engage with the discourse that is there, but to think critically, and examine what is not there. The line you draw about when to support your child and when to let your child fail is not one that is fine and rigid; it’s blurred and confounded by complexities and circumstances that are not always controlled by parenting. Most of the parents in our discussion group said much of their decision-making was based on who they were as people. They mentioned that it wasn’t even a cultural lens, but a personal lens — what they could handle, when making decisions about their children.

One of our parents contacted us by email after our second parent discussion where we talked about the book. She was not able to attend, but sent a copy of an email draft she had written after she found out her daughter was struggling in her first quarter calculus class. She shared that neither she nor her husband had a 4-year degree so they weren’t sure whether to be worried or not. She wrote the email but then remembered the author’s message from the book and decided to let it sit in her draft folder overnight. The next day she also let it sit and shared how her waiting turned into a week and then a month and then it never got sent until she followed up with us about how the book’s message gave her valuable insight into the importance of letting your child figure their way through mistakes. Her daughter ended up with a B in the class and reports to her mom that she loves being in our program and all the learning she is experiencing.

Overall, we found this book to be a helpful resource for parents and teachers working to understand and support the growing minds of advanced learners. We even had staff from our center request one of our copies so that they could use its lessons in their own parenting and teaching! Major themes we focused on for our parent meetings were our own experiences of failure, what failure brings up for us, having empathy for the agony of having to see your child fail, representations of failure, the role of culture and identity in managing failure, and specific strategies to use as we support students through their failures. Although no book can address every angle of an issue, we did find ourselves wishing for more cultural context from the author. Many dynamics play into our understanding, perception, and coping strategies when it comes to failure and we recognize that it is important to offer one’s own experiences and ideas from the context within which they emerge. We look forward to continued conversations with our parents and students about how we view and work through failures. Up next for our parent program: making our own failure resumes!

REVIEWER BIOS

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