



The Power of Defeat: How to Raise a Kid With Grit

Want to build a kid who has the strength, character, and drive to succeed in school and in life? Let him fail.

By Jennifer Fink



Andrew was the best reader in his class. The New York City first grader was two levels ahead and devoured every chapter book he could get his hands on. But Andrew couldn't ice skate a lick. On a class trip to a local rink, he was embarrassed as other kids whizzed by. After shuffling along the sideboards and falling down a few times, he melted into the ice and sobbed.

Yet a funny thing happened to Andrew (not his real name) the next few times his family hit the rink. He fell down again and again, but each time he picked himself up. Now in second grade, Andrew is the one racing down the ice, and he loves the sport as much as he does reading.

“His frustration was as painful for me as it was for him,” says his mom. “But overcoming it was a remarkable moment for him, one that I remind him about when he is feeling frustrated in other areas. Now he has firsthand experience that the most rewarding achievements are the ones that don’t come easily.”

Bouncing back from failure turns out to be one of the best lessons a kid can learn. In fact, according to Angela Duckworth, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, that skill (along with certain other character traits she calls “grit”) matters more to a child’s ability to reach his full potential than intelligence, skill, or even grades.

“The idea that kids have to get straight A’s in everything and to take advanced classes is misguided,” says Duckworth.

Duckworth has been studying the role character plays in success since 2005. She’s followed adults, West Point cadets, National Spelling Bee champions, and students at elite universities. In every case, she found that grit, not intelligence or academic achievement, was the most reliable predictor of a positive outcome. The kids who won the spelling bee weren’t necessarily smarter than their peers; they just worked a whole lot harder at studying words.

Unlike IQ, which is relatively fixed, grit is something everyone can develop. Sure, some kids are naturally more gritty than others, but there’s plenty you can do to help your child develop the stick-to-itiveness that will help him succeed in whatever he wants to pursue.

Follow our advice and get ready to watch your kid race ahead!

Put a challenge in front of him.

True achievement happens when people bust through boundaries and barriers. If your child never has a chance to triumph over something difficult, she may never develop confidence in her ability to confront a challenge. Taking risks is an important way kids learn.

- **Teach It:** Give your child the opportunity to pursue at least one difficult thing, suggests Duckworth. “It has to be something that requires discipline to practice,” she says. The actual activity doesn’t matter as much as the effort; Duckworth’s youngest child tried track, piano, and ballet before settling on gymnastics. “She couldn’t do a cartwheel at first, and had a lot of anxiety about it. Eventually, she got over the anxiety barrier and now she likes them so much that she literally does cartwheels two hours a day.” Encouraging kids to try new things gives them a chance to prove they can do anything.

Promote perseverance.

Many of us hold on to the idea that skill comes naturally: that if we’re good—or not good—at something, it’s because we were born that way. The problem with this belief is that it leads many kids to give up on things. Plus, it’s simply not true. Even naturally gifted people have to work hard to hone their ability with hours of practice.

- **Teach It:** Try one of Duckworth’s family rules: Don’t Quit on a Bad Day. Giving up the second things get frustrating means you might miss out on something really great—like eventually scoring that winning goal or hearing the roar of applause after a performance. So Duckworth insists that her two girls, ages 9 and 11, follow through on all activities until the end of the season or session. If they choose not to sign up again, so be it. What matters is that they push through the discomfort that’s a natural part of the learning process.

Be a nudge.

No one wants to be *that mom*, the one who pushes her child every step of the way. But it’s OK to let your kids know that you expect them to do their best and to create a structure that will help them do it. When Jill Gawrych’s 10-year-old daughter came home from school excited about the number of laps she’d run during gym, the Jackson, WI, mom asked how the other kids did. “That’s when I realized that she ran only about half as many,” says Gawrych. “It turns out that she ran with a friend to keep her company, which is fine, but we ended up talking about how someone else’s best isn’t always yours.”

- **Teach It:** Simply sharing what the expectations are, like Gawrych did, is the first step. But when your child is learning any new skill, athletic, musical, or

otherwise, nudging also means scheduling—and insisting on—practice times. “I haven’t yet heard of a kid who is completely self-winding,” Duckworth says. There’s nothing wrong with setting aside a daily practice time. Your child will probably still whine about it, but if you’re consistent, the complaints should decrease over time, and your child may even begin to appreciate the benefits later on (OK, maybe much later on!).

Welcome boredom and frustration.

Success rarely occurs on the first try. In fact, there’s usually a pretty long road peppered with all sort of bumps and potholes to navigate along the way. Being confused, frustrated, and sometimes completely bored out of your mind is part of the journey. And when kids understand that learning isn’t supposed to be easy all the time—and that having a tough time doesn’t mean they’re stupid—perseverance comes easier.

- **Teach It:** Instead of jumping in with a solution when your child hits a roadblock, see if she can come up with a way around it on her own. Say she’s struggling to build a school project. Resist every urge to do it for her. Then if it’s clear she’s at a loss, talk her through the problem: “It looks like you’re really having a hard time getting that roof to stay in place. What do you think might work instead?” Help her to think through what the steps might be instead of telling her what they are. “It’s so much more powerful for a child to be able to deal with adversity and overcome it,” says Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed*. “What the child takes from that experience is, ‘Hey, I can solve things.’”

Let him fall — and model resilience.

Being able to pick himself up from low moments is probably the most important skill a child can learn. Sarah McCoy’s oldest son was devastated when he didn’t do well in a chess tournament. The Eugene, OR, mom tried bucking him up, but eventually just gave him time to feel his negative emotions. “Later, I told him, ‘Chess is mostly a game of skill, but it’s also somewhat a game of chance,’” McCoy says. “I reminded him that it’s possible to be smart and accomplished, and still lose.”

- **Teach It:** Share your own struggles. Kids learn from the adults around them, so if you want your children to handle setbacks with grace, model calm and determination in the face of yours. “Lots of parents don’t want to talk about their failures in front of their kids, but that’s denying kids the potentially powerful experience of seeing their parents bounce back,”

Tough says. "If they see that adults can mess up and then come back and solve a problem, that's an important example they can use." McCoy takes this advice to heart and reminds her kids all the time that failure is nothing to be afraid of. "All of the most successful people in the world will tell you that it's about trying again for the 112th time," she says. "When you give up after a failure, you never get anywhere."