



# *Affective Center for Therapy*

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## **THE BENEFITS OF FAILING**

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I believe that, as parents, we affect our children in profound ways of which we are unaware. A word said in passing can have a life altering effect on a child. Our behaviors and words can either scar them or it can be the seeds of something great in their lives.

I was thinking of this the other day when I overheard a parent talking to her child. It reminded me of when I was 7 or 8 and was getting restless waiting while mother was talking to her friend. I remember Mom telling her friend something like, “Joseph looks just like Phil.” Suddenly, without thinking I blurted out, “Nobody looks like anybody else, once you get to know them.” I knew I should not have interrupted and waited for the reprimand. Instead, she stopped what she was saying, looked straight at me and said, “That is brilliant! That is so true. What great insight.” I remember being totally shocked.

That was the first time in my life that anyone had ever seen me that way. School has always been hard for me. My kindergarten teacher yelled at me because all I wanted to do was to make paper chains. I flunked first grade because no one knew that I could not see the blackboard. My second grade teacher had “tied” me to my desk so I would “remember” not to wander around the classroom. I was shocked and embarrassed. I had no idea that I was wandering around the classroom. To this day, I can “see” where I was supposed to be sitting, last row on the left, three desks back?

I can look back over my life now and say that that simple acknowledgement by my Mother was one of the pivotal points in my life. I am sure she had no idea how important what she said was in shaping my life. When school became a challenge for me, I would remember what she had said and, even though what I was experiencing did not seem to support her conclusion, I knew somewhere inside of me, I was smart.

As a father of five children, I spent more than my fair share of time worrying about how I was raising them and how what I was doing or not doing would affect them as adults. As they were growing up, I often wished I could see into the future and know the type of person they would become.

Doubts are not a bad thing to have as a parent. It is parents who KNOW how to raise their children that often cause the most damage. In parenting, there are two questions that you need to keep asking yourself:

1. What am I teaching my child when I do/say \_\_\_\_\_?

This is not a simple question. For instance, take a two month old baby who is crying. You checked everything and the baby is fine. Do you pick the child up or let them cry for a while? This is not an easy question. Am I teaching my baby to manipulate me or am I teaching them that they can tolerate delayed gratification? When you spank a 5 year old, are you teaching them not to do something or are you teaching the child that big people can hit little people? I said it is OK to have doubts; it is not OK to not think about what you are teaching.

2. Is what I am teaching my child going to get me what I want for them when they are 20 years old?

Let me give several examples. When my son Darren was two years old (the terrible twos) he did not want to wear what I had picked out for him and we would end up in a big power struggle. Finally, I gave up trying and did something different. I told him to go and pick out what he wanted to wear! In a few minutes, he was back with his favorite pair of pajamas with the little baseball players on them! Now I am thinking, what will my wife say, that I never changed my son's clothes. "Did you even bother to change his diaper?" And I am also thinking, "What will the neighbors think?"

Now, I know I did get him dressed and I did change his diaper. I am a good father. So, what is most important? That my son has the opportunity to make decisions for himself (and for us to avoid a power-struggle) or that I have to prove I am in control, that I am the parent.

Looking at the question of what I was teaching helped me make my decision. However, the next day, I was a little smarter. This time I laid out three outfits (that were not pajamas) and told Darren to pick out the one he wanted to wear. He was just as happy as he was the day before because he was getting to make the decision (how-be-it, within my acceptable limits).

Learning to make good decisions is not something that just happens when you turn 18. To be able to do this, **first**, you must be given the opportunity to make decisions. Making a child's decisions for them is teaching them that they are not capable of making decisions for themselves. **Second**, children need to be given the opportunity to make bad decisions and learn from the consequences. **"Good judgment comes from experience, and experience, well that comes from making bad judgments."**

Anonymous

It was a warm, pleasant fall; Darren was either in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Early one Saturday morning, I get a phone call asking, "Do you know where your son is?" After the initial shock, I said "I think he is bed," as I raced down the hall to his room. "Who is this?" I said as I rounded the corner into his room. "This is the Youth Pastor at church. Darren signed up with us to go to Great America." This was the first I had heard about any trip, "Here is Darren, you talk to him." After a minute of conversation, Darren was out of bed. "Dad, he said that if I can be there in 15 minutes, I can still go. Can I go?"

We were in the car in 5 minutes, and he was getting dressed as I drove. We were about three blocks from the church when he said, “Dad do you have any money?” I checked, I had forgotten to even bring my wallet.

Decision time, “Darren, what do you want to do? We could go home and get my wallet or go over to Mom’s work to see if she has some money or go on to church.” Darren’s decision was to go to church. There he was able to borrow \$5 from the Youth Pastor. Suddenly, he come running back. “It is an overnighter, we are going to eat at the church there tonight and sleep in the church gym.”

“What do you want to do? You did not bring a sleeping bag or even a tooth brush.” Darren’s decision was to go anyway. Now, I knew the Church, the Youth Pastor and a number of the parents that were going with them. I trusted them. So, I said, “OK. I will pick you up tomorrow at 3 PM.”

Mom was not happy when I told her what I had done. “How could you let ‘my’ son go without anything?” I thought to myself, I guess I could have been the bad guy and not let him go on the trip and deprive him of an opportunity of learning in a safe environment. Mom was not as convinced.

Sunday afternoon, I was at the church when the caravan returned with my son. On the way home, I asked, “How did it go?” Darren’s, response was, “It was ok. . . It could have been better.” And that is where the conversation about the trip ended! Nothing more needed to be said. Later, I found out from the pastor that he had to borrow somebody’s coat to sleep in and used someone else’s coat as a pillow.

In the spring, the church was to have a three day, two night back pack trip in the Sequoia Mountains. This time, Darren told me six weeks ahead! He had a list from the church of everything that he would need for the trip. He gave me a list of the materials that he and I would have to buy. A month before the trip, he had everything laid out in his room and each night he would go over the list checking against the items he had laid out, just to make sure. For this trip, he was *very* prepared. The trip went off smoothly, which could not be said for some of the other kids that went. This time, Darren was able to help out some of the kids with his supplies.

People talk about learning by trial and error. I have never heard of someone talking about learning from trial and success! Yet, what I so often see are parents protecting their children from the consequences of their behaviors, thereby protecting them from learning from their experiences.

Learning from experience has become a way of life for Darren. After graduating from Fresno State, Darren went into the Peace Corps and spent two years in Uzbekistan, teaching in some very challenging areas of that country. Since then, Darren has traveled in over 60 foreign countries. Today, he works in the United Arab Emirates as an administrator in a Woman’s University.

What do you want for your son or daughter when they turn 18 years of age? Making good choices for your life is not something that you suddenly learn once you become an adult.

Now, let's apply this same concept to your life. Making good decisions is not the only skill that you will need in your life, but it is one of the most important skills that you can learn. As an adult, allowing yourself to fail and then to learn from that failure is the best teacher you can have. I had a client tell me, "My second marriage is a success because my first was a failure."

The best way to thwart your learning process is to blame others. If your wife/husband did it to you, then you get to be the victim (and do not get to learn from the experience). "But, she/he had this affair on me." To that I often reply, "And, how did you get your mate to have the affair" If you cannot figure that out, then there is a good chance that it will happen again in your next relationship!

I have been told by some people, "I can't make a decision." That is impossible. For to make no decision, is a decision to keep things as they are.

The difference between a successful person and a failure is NOT that the successful one does not fail. A successful person is one who learns from their failures. It is not too late to embrace failure in yourself; failure only proves that you are human!

Hemingway said, "Everything is your fault. . . if you are lucky." If someone else is doing it to you, then you are their victim! If you are doing it to yourself, then you can change it.

If your children fail, what do you believe that says about you? Protecting your children from non-life-threatening hurts, is not loving them wisely.

As we grow, we need to be given two opportunities.

- ✓ First, to be given choices, even when the parent "knows better."
- ✓ Second, to be allowed to make bad decisions without being scolded or told that it was a bad decision.

Without these opportunities, risk becomes a negative, the fear of failure, shame, and loss instead of an opportunity for gain, glory and success.

Give your children and yourself the permission to: 1) Make decisions and 2) To make decisions that may result in failure, without judging yourself or blaming others.

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