

The Main Idea's Discussion Questions for *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*

Discussion Questions for Parents/Families

Introduction

1. Lahey gives an example of driving her son's homework to school when he forgets it. What is an example of something you have done to "rescue" your child from failure?
2. Lahey suggests that instead of rescuing our children from failure we should be focusing on a love of learning and independent inquiry. What are ways we can do this?
3. Lahey asked 8th graders to write about an experience that has shaped their education. What do you think about this student's response:

"Some people are afraid of heights, some are afraid of water; I am afraid of failure; which, for the record, is called *atychiphobia*. I am so afraid of failing that I lose focus on what actually matters; learning. In focusing on the outcome, I lose the value of the actual assignment and deprive myself of learning." (p.xxiii)
4. Lahey writes that middle school is a prime time for failure. Why do you think this is?

Part I -- Failure: A Most Valuable Parenting Tool

1. In thinking about one girl, Marianna, who gets good grades but who has lost her love of learning, Lahey wonders if her mother forgets that the best experiences of her own childhood likely arose from the thrill of facing challenge, from the moments lost in trying something, or from the adventure in learning something new. Take a moment to think back to some of the best moments of your own childhood and share these now.
2. Think of examples in your own life where you are rewarded extrinsically and others where you are rewarded intrinsically. Share examples of each, what motivates you in each, and how these examples differ.
3. The three parts of intrinsic motivation include: autonomy, competence, and connection. Discuss what these mean and why they are so important for intrinsic motivation?
4. If you are a parent, think how you might give your child the opportunity to feel autonomous, competent, and connected? If you are an educator, what's a lesson or project you could conduct to allow your students to feel autonomous, competent, and connected?
5. In the chapter, Lahey describes parents who gave their child, who was a poor speller, \$10 for each spelling quiz for which she got a perfect score. At first this worked and she received the \$10 each week. Then it stopped working. Why do you think this happened?
6. TRY IT AT HOME (If you have two sessions with parents, they can try something at home and report back): Tell your child that you expect homework to be thorough and complete but the *where*, *when*, and *how* are up to her. Give this a few weeks and report back on how well it went.
7. TRY IT AT HOME: Lahey suggests working with children to have them set their own goals. This doesn't have to be in a formal business-like meeting. It can be in the car or on a walk. This obviously works in the classroom, too. Try to meet with students/children and have them set a realistic goal of their own and report back in a few weeks on how well this worked to boost feelings of autonomy.
8. Brainstorm a list of all of the actions that fall under "autonomy-supportive" vs. "controlling" parenting and compare these to the chart in the BookBit:

Controlling parents...	Autonomy-supportive parents...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give lots of unsolicited advice and direction ("That's not the right way to load the dishwasher...") • Take over ("I'll just do it, you go play...") • Offer extrinsic motivators ("If you walk the dog each morning, I'll buy you those sneakers...") • Provide solutions before the child has a chance to struggle with the problem ("You know that five times four is twenty...") • Don't let children make their own decisions ("Do your math first, and then your spelling...") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for mistakes and help children understand the consequences of those mistakes ("Pick out the lumps in the oatmeal and I'll show you how to avoid that mistake next time.") • Value the mistakes as much as the successes ("I'm so proud of you for sticking with that even though it was hard for you.") • Acknowledge children's feelings of frustration ("I get mad, too, when I can't do something right the first time, but I keep trying.") • Give feedback ("Look down at your buttons; something looks off—can you figure out what's wrong?")

Part II: Learning from Failure: Teaching Kids to Turn Mistakes into Success

1. Lahey suggests on p.79 that teachers have more confidence that children can accomplish things than parents do. Do you agree? If so, why do you think this is?
2. Lahey also argues that, "...a child's education in service to others should begin at home [with chores], for her own family, and sooner rather than later." Do you believe children need to have chores? Or should we preserve their childhood and let them focus on other interests and school responsibilities?

3. For teachers – we often have job wheels for classroom chores for elementary students, but not middle or high school students. Given Lahey’s belief in the importance of teaching kids to contribute, should we rethink this idea in the upper grades? What about chores in the school – sweeping up in the cafeteria, taking out the garbage, etc.?
4. Lahey writes that it is actually through interacting with – and sometimes fighting and disagreeing with – their peers that children learn how to interact and negotiate with people. If parents intervene, we take these opportunities for growth and learning away. Do you agree? How do you know where to draw the line and intervene when children clash with peers? What about teachers at school – when should they intervene and when should they let children learn?
5. Lahey cites one study that finds success in peer play is *significantly* more predictive of academic success than results on standardized tests. (p.99) Why do you think this might be?
6. The issues children face when they become teenagers seem even larger and more potentially dangerous, and parents may feel an even stronger need to intervene, but Lahey writes, “I’m always going to err on the side of trusting my child in order to preserve autonomy.” (p.109) When do you feel it is appropriate to intervene in the life of a teenager?
7. Lahey quotes one teen who says, “My friends with strict parents lie so much more than the kids whose parents let them have some freedom.” (p.109) What do you think about this?
8. Lahey writes that for middle school students it is not a question of *if*, but a question of *when*, they will fail. Why do you think she is saying this particularly about middle school?
9. What are some ways that we – as parents or middle school teachers – can help middle school students become *aware* of their attention, behavior, or organizational issues? Lahey gives some suggestions in the chapter on pp 141-2 (such as tapping the child on the shoulder when she’s losing attention or using an acronym to remember to pay attention.) What are other ideas?
10. In Chapter 8 Lahey suggests that both parents and teachers make expectations for what they want middle school students to do crystal clear. Why is this so important for middle school students AND how can we go about doing this?
11. How actively are you – as a middle school teacher or a parent – helping to support your child’s study skills? Do you do binder checks? Ask the child to empty out loose papers regularly? Ensure that the child writes down assignments? How are you being supportive?
12. How is supporting your child in high school different than when she was in middle school? Lahey writes that in high school, we need to give our children the trust and responsibility they deserve. Share an example of a time you abided by this in your approach to your child and another time when you didn’t.
13. The Main Idea has compiled a list of the ‘Top 10 Skills Teenagers Need Before Heading to College.’ Are there other skills you would add to this list? How many of the skills have your children mastered already? Email Jenn for a more complete copy of this list or see the short version here:

<i>Top 10 Skills Teenagers Need Before Heading to College</i>	
1. laundry	6. getting around
2. basic cooking	7. owning mistakes
3. time management	8. securing a job/internship
4. managing money	9. asking for help
5. study habits	10. coping with life’s challenges

Part III- Succeeding at School: Learning from Failure is a Team Effort

1. Think of an example of a positive home-school relationship you’ve had in the past (this is for teachers *or* parents) and describe the relationship as well as why you think it worked so well.
2. Chapter 10 outlines a number of suggestions for improving home-school relationships such as: give teachers the benefit of the doubt, make sure your children show up to school on time, be friendly and polite to teachers, project an attitude of respect for education, model enthusiasm for learning at home, make sure your first communication with a teacher is positive, wait a day before emailing a teacher about a perceived crisis, and more. Did any of these strategies resonate with you? Do you have other suggestions for ways you’ve interacted with the school that have been beneficial that you’d like to share?
3. Chapter 11 outlines a number of suggestions for how parents should handle homework: guide younger children but set expectations and get out of the way for older students; check vision and hearing; ensure children are getting enough sleep; get rid of distractions; suggest your child does the hardest homework first; aim for learning, not perfection; and more. Again, like for the last chapter: Did any of these strategies resonate with you? Do you have other suggestions for ways you’ve dealt successfully with homework in your home that you’d like to share?
4. Imagine your child comes home and says that a certain homework assignment is stupid. You look at it and see that it doesn’t look like the most thoughtful assignment and will not likely contribute to your child’s learning. How might you respond? Keep in mind that Lahey suggests that parents show a respect for educators and understand the nonacademic benefits of homework.
5. In Chapter 5 Lahey writes that grades are a form of extrinsic reward that only serve to undermine learning and get in the way of parent-child relationships. What has been your experience with your child’s grades so far? How have you handled your and your child’s relationship to school grades?
6. Lahey recommends that parents *not* sign up for their child’s school grading portal (such as PowerSchool or iParent) which means giving up access to their grades 24/7. Instead she suggests we have conversations in person with our children and share the expectation that they will inform us at the first sign of academic trouble. What do you think about this? Could you do this? If not, could you experiment by not signing in to this system for a week? A month?