



# Let Your Kids Fail

## Using consequences to foster responsibility, confidence and success

by *Chip Ingram*

My son had an ambitious plan. He would drop out of college and focus on his music. All his life, I had urged him to discover what he was created to do and pursue what God had laid on his heart. I just didn't think it would be this — at least not if it meant skipping college. But music was his passion. College wasn't. He had made up his mind.

At first, I didn't know how to respond. I believe kids should be allowed to experience the consequences of their decisions, but the stakes get higher as they get older. The school of hard knocks has an increasingly difficult curriculum. But since its lessons are thorough, I told my son that if he wanted this bad enough to try to make it on his own — without expecting our financial support — he had my blessing.

After about six months, he realized how hard it is to earn a living with a band, and he came to another decision. He would still continue to pursue his dream, but he would also develop a backup plan — which included re-enrolling in college. He held on to his vision but balanced it with realism.

I probably could have forced that decision on my son, but that wouldn't have changed his heart. He would have continued to restlessly look forward to the day he could get out from under his dad's plan for his life. Instead, he got a life-altering perspective on the realities of working for a goal.

The decision to finish school was his. And this time, he was motivated to do well at college.

## The importance of failure

Letting children face the consequences of their choices shouldn't begin with something as significant as a career decision. It needs to start much earlier. When our four children were young, my wife and I often had to remind ourselves not to obey our natural impulse to fix their problems.

Learning cause and effect through success and failure is part of a necessary maturing process. Intervening can interrupt that process. Kids can't become responsible adults without failing sometimes.

One way we used failure to teach our kids responsibility was by requiring them to set their own alarm clock and get up when it rang. We were tired of prying them out of bed each morning and making sure they ate breakfast, got dressed and caught the bus. And we were tired of driving them to school when they missed the bus. At a certain age (about 11 or 12 in our house) kids should be able to handle those responsibilities. So we implemented a rule: Whoever overslept and missed breakfast or the bus would suffer the consequences — hunger until lunchtime, detention after school, makeup assignments.

Yet we had a strong urge to intervene — no parent enjoys seeing his children get into messes — but we resisted. It didn't take long for our kids to learn to discipline themselves each morning. The short-term pain of their bad decisions was much easier on them than the long-term power struggle many families go through. We had no more nagging or heated arguments. Just consequences.

## Learning to struggle

We do our children a disservice when we cover for them or alleviate the consequences of their choices. Parents who write a note to the teacher explaining why their child once again failed to finish his homework set up the child for a lifetime of seeking special treatment — and frustration when it isn't given. Parents who push for their child to get the lead role in a play — even when he doesn't deserve it — deny the child the opportunities for growth that come with failure and disappointment.

Kids never learn how to cope with life when parents do all the coping for them. They enter adulthood without the confidence that they'll be able to handle whatever comes their way.

To make it in this world, kids need to know how to struggle. They need to learn how to persevere for a hard-fought victory and how to handle disappointment when victory doesn't come. They need to understand that they reap what they

sow and that life isn't always fair.

In order to learn these things, they'll have to experience a lot of bumps and bruises. Some will be self-inflicted, and others will be imposed on them by a sinful world. But all of their wounds can become a lifelong lesson in how to stand strong.

Your kids will have to learn these hard lessons sooner or later, and sooner is better. Once they become adults, the world won't clean up after their mistakes, and it won't nurse their wounds when they are treated unfairly. If they've learned wisdom and responsibility early, they'll reap the benefits for a lifetime.

## **The role of parents**

A parent's job is not to make sure a child has a smooth or comfortable life. Our role is to put safeguards around them when they're young to keep them from ultimate harm; to gradually widen those safeguards as they mature; and to help them to grow into the person God wants them to be.

The son who once dropped out of college eventually earned his degree. Later, as a newly married man, he told me he was moving to Nashville, Tenn., to pursue the dream God had put on his heart. I wasn't thrilled with his decision, but I gave him my blessing anyway.

Yes, he might fail again, but I knew it wouldn't happen because he was naive. From his earlier experience, he knew what it would take to succeed. And the second time he actually did. He's now a successful songwriter — and standing strong in the trials of life.

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