

EMPOWERING versus ENABLING
Allowing kids to Fail May Open the Door to Success

We seem to gain wisdom more readily through our failures than through our successes. We always think of failure as the antithesis of success, but it isn't. Success often lies just the other side of failure.

Leo Buscaglia

The mother of a sixth grader called me for a one-on-one consultation. I could tell by her voice that she was clearly agitated. "I had to type my son's term paper until after midnight last night because he hadn't even STARTED it until yesterday afternoon!"

"Did you get it finished?" I asked.

"Yes, but I am exhausted today and angry at my son for making me do that."

"Hmmm, yes you must be exhausted and I can hear that you are frustrated. How did he make you type it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, did he tie you to the chair.....?" She laughed, understanding that I was teasing her but she replied,

"Well, I HAD to type it. It was late and he was really tired by the time he finally got the research done and he doesn't type fast."

"What would have happened if you didn't type it?"

"He would have failed the assignment!"

"What would have happened then?"

"He would have gotten a bad English grade on his report card."

"What would he have learned if he'd gotten a bad grade?"

"Hmmm," she hesitated then tentatively offered, "That he won't get a good grade if he waits until the last minute to write a paper?"

"Yup...probably. How much would it hurt him academically to learn this lesson now?"

"Well...not much."

"How much will it hurt him if he doesn't learn this lesson until high school?"

"All high school grades are on a transcript; so...a lot more, I guess."

"What do you think his take home message is now that you stayed up late typing his paper while he slept?"

"That I am an amazing Mom?" she joked.

"Do you feel like an amazing Mom?"

"Well kind of...but I was angry and let him know how angry I was the whole time...so then he got mad at ME even though I did all this work for him! It was a bad scene last night. I guess I feel like a frustrated mom."

"What did he learn from last night do you think?" She thought for a moment.

"That if he puts up with my yelling, he can count on putting work off to the last minute and I'll jump in and save his behind and he'll still get a good grade."

"So, it seems that you now can count on this happening again. When will you choose to STOP doing his homework for him?" I asked.

"I hadn't thought of it this way," she replied. I guess I should stop doing it now...but I don't want him to FAIL!! I want him to be successful!"

I was quiet for a second. “The way you can help him be successful is to choose stop enabling him now and start to EMPOWER him.”

The parenting technique that my client used that night was what Jane Nelsen calls the “Ball ‘em Out and Bail ‘em Out” method. We think that our scolding and anger is giving them the message that they can’t do this again. Instead, the message they get is that if they can put up with the scolding, they can count on you rescuing them. An opportunity to learn important lessons from the real world is lost and they do not gain new skills to help them in the future. This approach ENABLES the continuation of the lack of organization, the lack of time management, the lack of study skills, the lack of typing skills, and/or the discomfort with the subject matter etc.

When kids don’t accomplish what they are supposed to or when they don’t follow rules or when they challenge us with their behavior or lack of follow through, we often will get caught up in using pain, shame or blame in order to get them to tow the line. When that doesn’t have the desired affect we will sometimes either rescue them OR give up. Any one of these responses is “enabling” as it does not involve helping the child to take responsibility himself. Holding kindly and firmly to the teaching of the moment and allowing the child to be accountable is hard work that requires some consciousness and forethought. Most parents would agree that though more time consuming, a kind yet firm approach is more effective in the long run. It allows you to EMPOWER your child to develop many skills and find strategies that help them to succeed.

Imagine your child comes to you, telling you that he has not finished his project and it is due tomorrow. Here are some ENABLING responses that might come out of our mouths:

- Punishment (pain, shame): “Unbelievable!! You haven’t been able to get your homework done all week! What is going on with you?? Get into your room right now! Get going on it and no TV for the rest of the week!”
- Rescuing: “Oh, that’s O.K. You have been really busy. It’s a big project. It’s probably O.K. that you can’t get it done.”
- Bribing: “You know I’ll give you \$10. For every “A” you get on your report card. You’d better get this homework done fast or you will be losing that \$10!”
- Threats: “If you don’t march into your room this minute and get that done, you are grounded this weekend!”
- Rescuing (ball ‘em out and bail ‘em out): “ARRRRGGHH! I can’t believe it! I have been after you all week to get this done! It’s due tomorrow? HMMFF! Well, give me that paper and I’ll type it for you while you get the rest of the illustrations done! When will you learn?”

- Shame: “What is wrong with you? Do you WANT to fail? You can do MUCH better than that! Really, you should be ashamed of yourself”

Instead, EMPOWER a child to think and learn. He might have to fail...which will open new doors of opportunity. Let your child know that you are available to help him to find ways to structure time and divide up tasks into do-able pieces. Any time spent helping at the front end with organization is not doing FOR your child, it is helping him to build organizational skills so that he can better DO FOR HIMSELF. Otherwise, allow children to work at their level...not yours...even if it means a lower grade. Here are some EMPOWERING statements for the scenario above that encourage your child to develop accountability, self reliance, organizational skills and problem solving skills.

- Hmm...What is your plan?
- Oh, that doesn't leave much time, but I know you can do it. How will you take care of it?
- I bet you can get it done. How are you going to get started?
- Oh, that's a problem. Tell me how you might solve it.
- You've got tonight and tomorrow morning. How are you going to organize your time?
- As you know, I am available and happy to help you every day from 4:00-5:00. I haven't heard from you and now it is 6:00. You'll need to do your best on your own tonight and I will be available tomorrow again between 4:00-5:00.

If you encourage it, this kind of learning can be done early in elementary school, and your child will become self reliance at an earlier time. But if, instead, fear of your child's failure keeps you “bailing ‘em out and bailing ‘em out” they could avoid developing these skills all the way through high school....keeping you working hard to rescue them again and again.

Some tips:

- Remember to be kind and calm in your firmness. Any of the empowering responses, said with anger or sarcasm are no longer empowering.
- Be genuinely curious about how your child is going to solve the problem at hand. Offer in the moment help with problem solving (but keep yourself from doing your child's work FOR him!)
- Enlist the help of your child's teachers. Often teachers will rescue your children by overlooking the lateness or absence of children's work. This really doesn't

help your child in the long run. Let them know that you are hoping to allow the natural consequences of turning something in late or not at all will help your child be open to developing some new skills. Let the teachers know that your child may be approaching them for extra help. It helps teachers be open to students when they feel as though they are teaming with the parents at home.

My client and I worked on a new approach for her to use with her son rather than the familiar “Ball ‘em Out and Bail ‘em Out” technique that was not very effective for teaching her son the skills she wanted him to learn. In a conversation with her son a week later, my client was able to sit down and say, “I felt really bad about how much I yelled and nagged and complained that night that we put your project together. How did you feel about it? She learned that it was uncomfortable and upsetting for him, too. She explained to him that in future she would no longer be available on the 2 nights before a project was due because it was just too stressful for both of them. Instead, she offered to be a part of the front end of a project. She said she’d be happy to sit down with him right after the project was assigned and help him to put together a plan that may make it easier for him to get his project done and that if he’d like her help, he’d need to make a date with her as soon as he learned of it. A month or so went by before he son told her that he had a social studies project come up. To remind him, she said, “Great! I am available to sit down tonight at 7:00 or tomorrow at 7:00. When would you like to meet?” He chose a time and when they sat down, rather than lecturing, she asked her son questions which modeled “self talk” that she hoped would he would eventually begin to do for himself. I don’t know exactly what she asked but they might have been questions like this:

- When is the due date?
- Knowing that at this point it takes you a long time to type, how much time do you want to give yourself to get the typing piece done?
- How much time do you think you could put in to this each day in order to have it ready by the due date?
- Are there logical “chunks” of work that you can divide up?
- When, specifically, are you going to work on this each day?
- Where are you going to write your schedule down...on a wall calendar? A pocket or book calendar? graph paper? OK, let’s do this together right now.
- What are the tools and materials you need? Do you have them? How can you get them?
- How are you going to remind yourself to get this done each day?
- How are you going to celebrate when each of the “chunks” is completed? I can help with that celebration if you’d like!

My client then explained that though she would not do work FOR him (and would not type) she would be happy to SUPPORT his efforts. She was willing to help with problem solving; she was happy to look his work over and offer a couple of suggestions; if he was stuck, she was willing to help him figure out something he didn’t understand AND she was willing to help keep his work space free and clear of siblings and distractions. Other than that, this was going to be his own work.

Instead of rescuing her son from failure and continuing to enable him, she chose to empower her son and give him an opportunity to learn skills important to his future success. The proactive firmness that is evident in this approach may be difficult at first but practiced AT THE SAME TIME with compassion and kindness, it is well worth the effort and saves YOU from many stressful late nights at the computer!