

A Parent's Guide to  
**FAILURE**

axis

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A society cannot make do with only talking about victory—we always say that we learn more from defeat than from victory. So if we learn from defeat, we should pay a bit more attention to those who lose.

—Alain Pelillo, *Losers* (Season 1, Episode 8)

“

The setbacks, mistakes, miscalculations, and failures we have shoved out of our children's way are the very experiences that teach them how to be resourceful, persistent, innovative, and resilient citizens of the world.

—Jessica Lahey, *The Gift of Failure*

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## The real F word.

What do you imagine when you think about failing? Perhaps missing a game-winning shot? Or maybe disappointing your parents or spouse? Losing a client at work? Usually memories of failure are painful ones, filled with shame and regret. Oxford Dictionary defines failure as “lack of success,” but it seems that failure carries much more emotional weight. Being “unsuccessful” seems to say something about the kind of performer you are, but being a failure seems to say something about the kind of person you are.

So what kind of people are we? When our vision of who we are is wrapped up in the things we do, it can be easy to allow the disappointment of failure to be absorbed into our identity. And in a world that lauds success and accomplishment, young people seem to have to keep more and more kinds of failure at bay.

Folk wisdom would tell us that there are two responses to failure: let it kill us or let it make us stronger. In this way, failure is a double-edged sword—either we can passively allow it to define us, or we can actively choose to let it refine us. With this in mind, we need to pay close attention to what happens to our teens in moments of failure, as it may reveal something important about who they believe themselves to be.

In this guide, we seek to understand what teens are really afraid of, how to parent through failure with grace, and, in a culture that sees through a success/failure lens, how to emphasize faithfulness and honesty.

## Why are we so afraid of failure?

In the US, our relationship with failure is complicated. We tend to have three responses to it. First, Gene Kranz’ famous words about the Apollo 13 mission, “[Failure is not an option](#),” have become somewhat of a cultural anthem: Avoid failure at all costs. Second, perhaps because we recognize that failure is inevitable, we minimize its importance and impact and instead consider it humorous, as evidenced by the continuous, exceeding popularity of YouTube [fail videos](#). And third, thanks to narratives about how some of America’s most admired people (e.g. Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates) experienced some sort of “failure” that eventually spurred them on to achieve massive success, we

try to minimize its impact, saying that failure is simply a speed bump on the road to our dreams. These famous failures highlight our belief that everything will fall into place [if you only try hard enough](#).

The fact that we've become experts at demonizing, humorizing, and trivializing failure illuminates one key truth: Failure makes us uncomfortable because we have an incorrect perspective of it (but don't necessarily realize it), so we try to either avoid or downplay it. This is even more true for teenagers, who are trying to figure out who they are and what defines them. Failure only seems to threaten their identity, as well as their ability to be seen, liked, and affirmed.

But in order to put failure in its place, we first have to look at our understanding of success.

## What is success to Gen Z?

When envisioning "success," [Baby Boomers and Gen Xers](#) typically think of a house with a white picket fence, a stable marriage with a few kids, a steady career with good pay and benefits, and a retirement plan. But Gen Z, seeing some of the problems this definition created, tends to define success differently.

Several years ago in a [nationwide poll](#), researchers noticed a shift in our cultural understanding of success. They found that "a whopping 90% [of Americans] believe that success is more about happiness than power, possessions, or prestige." As Gen Z is often known as the "[post-truth](#)" generation, or one which seeks to define its own morality, it's no surprise that Gen Zers are also seeking to redefine some of America's most basic values, including success. Subsequently, Gen Zers may pursue a less conventional path for the sake of personal happiness and fulfillment. Unfortunately, simply changing the definition of success doesn't make them immune to failure.

## What kinds of failure is Gen Z afraid of?

Academic, athletic, moral, social, romantic? As the world becomes more interconnected,

and as teens' lives become more complicated, opportunities for failure seem to be more and more prevalent. Though time could be spent unpacking the implications of every kind of failure, we ought to consider which kinds teens are most afraid of.

According to [this study](#), many of teens' biggest fears revolve around their performance. The most prevalent fears amongst the 5,700 teens surveyed were:

- Poor academic performance or not getting good grades (75.5%)
- The future or life after graduation (66%)
- Having to audition or try out in order to be a part of something, e.g. auditioning for a musical, trying out for a sport team, etc. (54%)
- Peer pressure or not fitting in with people at school (40%)

In short, it seems as though teens fear situations where they may or may not live up to others' standards. What is beneath this insecurity? Why does this kind of failure translate into the notion of being a failure?

## Why does my teen think he/she is a failure?

In his homily, [The Life of the Beloved](#), Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen said we tend to believe three primary lies about our identity:

1. I am what I do.
2. I am what other people say about me.
3. I am what I have.

If these lies are internalized, not only do they completely shape how we view ourselves, they also give an identifying power to things that shouldn't identify us. The things we do or have and the opinions of others would become the primary ways by which we understand our value.

Let's look at the first lie, "I am what I do." There are a few possible responses we could have to failure, and what we believe about our identity seems to lead us toward these responses. If a teen has a sense of identity that is rooted in something other than the things they do, failure might still hurt, but it likely wouldn't affect them too deeply. Knowing that they are not defined by what they do or fail to do, they're able to bounce back. However, if a teen believes the lie, "I am what I do," failure acts as a sort

of [confirmation bias](#). They may start to believe that failure is something inside them, a part of their identity, and whenever they fail, that's confirmation that they're not talented, smart, attractive, good, [insert adjective here] enough. If we are what we do, then when we fail, we *become* failures, and the outward failure is a manifestation of an inward worthlessness or incapability.

Nouwen points to [Jesus' temptations](#) in the wilderness as a temptation to believe the three lies, but Jesus denies them because He believed something truer about His identity. In [Matthew 3:16-17](#), we read:

*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'*

Keep in mind that this occurred just before Jesus began His ministry. He hadn't yet (that we know of) healed anyone, fed the crowds, or spoken truth to thousands. Because Jesus knew that He was the beloved Son of God before He began His ministry—before He *did* anything or had the chance to *earn* His belovedness—His identity was unshakable. When we know that the truth of our identity lies far beneath what we do or fail to do is when we'll be able to [respond as Jesus did](#).

## Why do we need to deal with failure better?

The approaches to failure we've explored so far—demonizing, humorizing, trivializing, or overidentifying—aren't helping anyone. Since failure is an inevitable experience, especially in the teenage years, demonizing it or making it seem like it's not an option may keep a teen from having the countenance to try anything. Humorizing failure doesn't lead to steps in a different direction, and telling a teen that "trying harder" is all that's needed to become the next Steve Jobs will likely feel trite. We saw how over-identification with failure can be detrimental to a teen's sense of identity, but we also need to acknowledge the risk of avoiding failure altogether.

Administrators at Stanford and Harvard have coined the term "failure deprived" to describe the state of many college students who experience some sort of failure *for the first time in their lives* in college. These students don't encounter significant setbacks

earlier in life and find themselves at a loss when they fail (or don't get an A+) for the first time. Many schools are [launching initiatives](#) with the intent of welcoming failure and even providing space for students to showcase failure, in order to build resilience and grit among students. In order for failure to be a *refining* experience instead of a *defining* experience, it seems as though we as parents ought to ensure that our homes are ones in which failure is welcome.

Jessica Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure*, [discusses the connections](#) between [autonomy-supportive parenting](#) and the ability to learn well, to sit with frustration, and persevering through what she calls “desirable difficulties.” She argues that overparenting (i.e. removing opportunities to succeed and fail on their own) can result in a learned helplessness in our kids. She points out that in classroom settings, kids who are used to directing themselves are able to encounter frustration, allowing it to push them toward creativity and problem-solving, rather than causing them to feel overwhelmed and consequently give up. Though it feels counterintuitive, we may be limiting our teens if we're not allowing them to experience the right kind of failure.

## Shouldn't I protect my kids from failure?

It is 100% natural to want our kids to succeed and to avoid pain and rejection. We want our kids to thrive! However, there has to be a safe space in which they can experiment, make mistakes, and learn from them. Failure is a result of the use of freedom. Doing things our way means that there's always the potential to screw them up. Using freedom well is a primary lesson teens learn (or avoid learning) in young adulthood. **Stepping in so that our kids won't be able to make a *wrong* choice might prevent them from learning how to make a *wise* choice.** It seems as though the more delayed the freedom, the more delayed the ability to make wise choices.

Of course, this does not mean that we simply ought to turn our kids loose in the world. There are real and legitimate consequences we do want to protect them from (e.g. addiction to drugs). However, we have to acknowledge that there's a difference between the consequences of a 13-year-old not studying for a test, and the consequences of an 18-year-old spending the night with his girlfriend. As parents, we need to ask ourselves: **Are we providing opportunities for our kids to experience failure when the**



**consequences are not yet detrimental? Or are we protecting them from any sort of failure until they're of the age that their choices may lead to very real, significant consequences?** Are they learning from an early age how to deal with the natural consequences of their choices, or are we always stepping in to be the consequence, thus keeping them from learning from life firsthand?

We also shouldn't ignore that failure can have extremely beneficial consequences. In the Netflix show [Losers](#) (TV-MA), athletes share stories of their biggest and most humiliating failures and how they responded to them. In the first episode, former boxer Michael Bentt shares the story of his rise and fall in the world of professional boxing. Of the fight that ended his career, he says: "Getting knocked out by Herbie Hide was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was painful, but if I had not gotten knocked out by Herbie Hide, I'd still be playing the role of the boxing guy, wearing that mask." Boxing was actually Bentt's father's dream for him, not one he chose for himself. When this failure made him unable to fight, he was free to pursue his own path. After recovering from the knockout, he started a career training actors in Hollywood for roles as boxers. He commented, "Unlike in boxing, actors are open to failure. And they even seek it out."

## How can I teach my kids to own their failures?

In order for failure to be a launching point for growth instead of an insurmountable setback, our kids need to learn to own their failures and not be ashamed of them. In her book [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#), Dr. Carol Dweck discusses the difference between the core beliefs of people who interact healthily with failure—what she calls "growth mindset"—and of those who allow failure to stop them in their tracks—what she calls "fixed mindset":

*Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the fixed mindset—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character—well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. It simply wouldn't do to look or feel deficient in these most basic characteristics....But there's another mindset in which these traits are not simply a hand you're dealt and have to live with, always trying to convince yourself and others that you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair of tens. In this mindset, the hand you're dealt*

*is just the starting point for development. The growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts... Everyone can change and grow through application and experience.*

It may be helpful not only to assess which mindset our teens gravitate toward, but also which one we ourselves gravitate toward. If we find that our teens possess a primarily fixed mindset, it may be because we've passed it on to them and therefore need to reconsider how we give feedback. [Dweck suggests](#) focusing on “yet” instead of “now”—in other words, training kids to look long-term so that setbacks become a means to an end rather than the end themselves. She also suggests praising process instead of intelligence, recognizing that we should endeavor to raise kids who can work and learn well, rather than kids who believe [they simply do or do not](#) have what it takes.

If our teens are in situations that push them outside of their comfort zones or their perceived gifts, they will inevitably encounter what will feel to them like failure. So a simple way to get them on the path of owning failure could be to encourage them to engage in activities that will require them to face significant challenges, all the while encouraging the process by which they tackle the challenges rather than focusing primarily on the outcome. Another small, but powerful, thing you can do is encourage discussion of perceived failures. If you never talk about failure, it will seem taboo; but if you openly discuss your own failures and get your kids talking about theirs, it will make it less painful and possibly even lead to new perspectives of their so-called “defeats.”

## How do I know if I'm overemphasizing success?

To some kids, success will come easy. Rewarding them for being smart or athletic might not be wrong, but it might not be what they need most. At the same time, other kids might struggle with conventional ideas of success. Teaching them to accomplish in the same way as the “successful” kid might not be the most helpful for them, either. Dr. Dweck explains:

*After seven experiments with hundreds of children, we had some of the clearest findings I've ever seen: Praising children's intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance. How can that be? Don't children love to be praised? Yes, children love praise. And they especially love to be praised for their intelligence*

*and talent. It really does give them a boost, a special glow—but only for the moment. The minute they hit a snag, their confidence goes out the window and their motivation hits rock bottom. If success means they're smart, then failure means they're dumb. That's the fixed mindset.*

She argues that, instead, we ought to praise the process, effort, growth, and the work they put in. Doing this is teaching them to be *faithful*, to show up with their whole selves, working hard and applying their energy as best as possible, and it helps us parents to better accept their failures as they inevitably come.

## Could my teen be afraid of my response to his/her failure?

It's not easy to be completely objective when our teens fail. There will be times when we're disappointed, angry, or hurt by their choices. In these moments, it's helpful to take a step back and remember that there's a difference between making a mistake and doing something wrong. Both are kinds of failures, but very different kinds that should be handled in nuanced and gracious ways. Unfortunately, for some teens, making an honest mistake might feel as wrong as making an immoral choice.

If our goal as parents is *perfection* from our kids, then mistakes ought to be treated the same as immorality, but if our goal is *faithfulness* from them, then mistakes will inevitably be part of their journey. Do our kids know that they're allowed to be honest, even when their honesty may be disappointing and hard to hear? Or might they have a fear, however irrational, that they would get in trouble for making a mistake?

We should aim to show our kids the same grace that God shows us every single day as we make mistakes, choose poorly, and even outright go against Him. It's also helpful to honestly analyze what we value and expect from our kids and how we communicate that to them. If they feel held to a certain standard of performance, it could be very easy for them to say one thing and do another for the purpose of keeping peace in their parental relationships while maintaining their own sense of autonomy.

While an Axis team was speaking at a high school, a teenage girl said a phrase that was immensely eye-opening: "The stricter the parent, the sneakier the child." What she

meant is that teens will find ways to seemingly give the parent what they want, while finding other ways to maintain freedom, because this kind of double-life may feel safer than 100% honesty. Though it will look different for every parent-child relationship, we all need to consider honestly and prayerfully what might be making it difficult for our teens to be honest with us.

## How can I have a gracious response?

Sometimes our teens' failures will be more than honest mistakes. In these moments of moral failure, how can we maintain grace? They will probably know that what they did was wrong, but what they may not know is that we still want to have a relationship with them—that though there will still be consequences, ultimately their actions do not fundamentally change the way we see them.

In [this interview](#), author of Grace-Based Parenting Dr. Tim Kimmel argued:

*We want to have a love for our kids that they know deep down in their heart is not connected to their behavior. It has absolutely nothing to do with how they act. It has everything to do with who they are.*

This philosophy is borne out of God's approval of Jesus at His baptism. **Our teens should know that they cannot lose their belovedness any more than they earned it in the first place.** If they're open enough to share their failures with us, we ought to celebrate their honesty. If we discover a failure they didn't share with us, it's still an opportunity for us to practice grace, as well as an opportunity for them to learn from the consequences of their choice and enter into more transparent relationships with us. Dr. Kimmel continues:

*We can summarize grace-based parenting in one sentence: Treat your kids the way God treats you....Here are some things that God as a parent doesn't do with His kids: He never yells at us. Or screams at us or berates us or insults us or marginalizes us or trivializes our feelings. He never shames us.*

## How does God view failure?

Earlier, we discussed the trifold American response to failure. Not surprisingly, when

we turn to Scripture, we encounter an entirely different narrative than what has been our typical cultural understanding. Rather than demonizing, humorizing, or trivializing failure, God is always working to *redeem* failure. God's people falling short is such a constant theme throughout Scripture that one might think that was the Bible's thesis statement. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, [he discusses](#) the "thorn in his flesh," something that seemed to limit Paul's ministry, which he asked for the Lord to remove:

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Paul encourages believers to embrace limits because every way in which we are weak is an opportunity to consent to the strength of God. Every way in which we are not enough is a calling to rest in the "enoughness" of God. Granted, Paul's thorn may not have been a moral failure, but it was a limitation, something that kept Paul from perfection. And instead of Paul over-identifying with this imperfection, he allowed it to propel him toward dependence on God for grace. Living out of our own strength is not something we're called—or even able—to do. We see this clearly through [the entire narrative of Israel](#), in which God's chosen people constantly fail to live into their identity and calling.

Jesus tells [a parable](#) that illustrates the downward spiral of one young man's life as a result of his moral failures. The so-called "prodigal son" overtly denied his relationship with his father, then used his father's generosity as a means to live a wild and presumably immoral life. It's hard to imagine more blatant rebellion. However, when the son returns to the father in honesty, the father did not breathe a word about his mistake. Though many "I told you so"s could have been uttered, the father simply welcomes honesty and repentance with thanksgiving and celebration.

A former Axis employee named Esther had a similar experience in her late teen years. She was in a relationship in which she gave up her virginity, and, like many Christian teens, she felt that because of this choice, she was obligated to marry her boyfriend. This situation eventually led to the young man proposing and the two running away from home. After several weeks of being gone, she realized that what she had in that relationship wasn't the kind of love that she wanted or needed—it wasn't the love she

had come to know from her parents or from the Lord, and she eventually made the choice not to go through with the marriage and to return home.

As she was nearing her house, rehearsing what she would say when she saw her parents again, she heard their screen door slam shut and saw her father running toward her car. She remembers, “My dad took me and my boyfriend in his arms...and he whispered in my ear, ‘Esther, from the day you were born till the day you die, I will love you the same. And as pure as you were then, that’s as pure as I see you now.’”

Moments of brokenness like this have the potential to be so shame-filled and destructive, but in Esther’s and the prodigal son’s cases, they were holy ground—and because they were handled graciously, they were powerfully redemptive and reformatory. She continued, “I firmly believe that the redemption I live into today is because of the way my dad embraced me in that moment.”

When God redeems failure, He does not ignore it nor deny its consequences. But He also doesn’t define us by it or remind us of past failures. We read in [Psalm 103:10](#), “He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” And yet we often forget this truth. If we have experienced God’s grace in our own lives, how much more should our children experience our grace in their lives? Once we realize that we are all under the same grace of God, equally beloved by Him, then we can move past failure, or the guise of perfection, into honest relationship.

## How can I model vulnerability in my home?

A discussion on failure is hard to keep impersonal. If we desire our kids to be upfront and vulnerable about their failures, we need to set the tone by opening up first. This may look like sharing our own failures from when we were teens, or it could look like confessing ways in which we’ve fallen short as parents. As long as we keep up an image of being without failure, as long as we hide or diminish our mistakes, our teens will likely do the same. Tastefully share your regrets, your mistakes, and the lessons you learned from them. And above all, make your home a place in which each person is fully seen, known, and loved without having anything to hide—failures and all.

## Conclusion

In the story of Jesus, we see the ultimate culmination of God's redemption of human failure. The stories of His ancestors, the people who brought the messiah into the world, are riddled with [prostitution, adultery, and murder](#). Yet the people who failed in these ways are all still [part of the story](#) of God redeeming humankind. Our teens need to know that their failures do not disqualify them from being used by God, but could actually serve as an avenue for restoration, so that they can live into the freedom and redemption that God offers all of us.

Ultimately, we're not called to be successful, but we are called to be faithful. Getting caught up in fears about failure can distract us from a much deeper truth: that we are not measured by the weight of our accomplishments. Rather, we are invited to faithfully participate in God's redemption of all things, including our own failures and the world's. And this process of participation begins with the reclaiming of our identity. That we are not what we do, have, or what people say about us, but that we, parents and teens alike, are the beloved children of God.

So while success and failure can feel like the two ends of the spectrum, it's possible that it's the wrong spectrum to care about. Instead of evaluating our teens through a success/failure lens, we might need to consider whether they gravitate toward self-doubt and abnegation or confidence in their identity. Perhaps we should consider whether they are faithfully showing up in life, or if they've written themselves off as incapable of having a place or making a difference. From there, not only can we give them space to make necessary mistakes, but we can also engage in the kind of honest and redemptive conversations that build lifelong faith.

## Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [Anxiety Video Kit](#)
- [Identity Video Kit](#)

- [A Parent’s Guide to Shame-Free Parenting](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Tough Conversations](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Fear & Worry](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Making Your Home a Safe Place](#)
- Check out [axis.org](https://axis.org) for even more resources!
- If you’d like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

## Additional Resources

- [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol Dweck
- [The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed](#) by Jessica Lahey
- [Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance](#) by Angela Duckworth
- [Grace-Based Parenting](#) by Tim Kimmel
- [“Grit: the power of passion and perseverance”](#) TED talk by Angela Duckworth
- [“Why Failure is Healthy for Teens,”](#) Newport Academy
- [Losers](#), Netflix series (TV-MA)
- [“On Campus, Failure Is on the Syllabus,”](#) *The New York Times*
- [“Failure Deprived?”](#) The University of Portland

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# A Parent's Guide to **FAILURE**

## Recap

- Failure is a necessary and important part of the teenage experience.
- It's likely that success looks very different to your teen than it does to you.
- Remember, your teen's fear is a tender and holy place. Opening up to you might be hard for them.
- Our teens need to be given opportunities to take risks and to fail.
- Remember that not every mistake is moral, nor the end of the world.
- It may be worth reconsidering what we reward.
- It can be important to let your teen learn from life's consequences themselves, rather than sheltering them from them.
- Your teens need to see you being upfront about your failures before they will be willing to be honest about theirs.
- We may need to offer an apology if we've created an environment in which our teens don't feel that they can be honest.
- We all have the capacity and the calling to offer grace.

**Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!**

# A Parent's Guide to **FAILURE**

## Discussion Questions

- How have you seen other people handle their failures or mistakes? Why do you think they responded in that way?
- Do you think our culture is good at handling failure? Why or why not?
- Are you afraid of “messing up” or making mistakes? Why or why not?
- Have you ever not done something because you weren't sure you could succeed? Tell me about that experience.
- Do you think I handle failure well? Why or why not? (Reassure them they can be completely honest and you won't get mad!)
- How do you think success is related to failure?
- Do you think we overemphasize success too much in our home? Why or why not?
- What do you think a good response to a failure is? Why? Why don't you think people do that more often?
- Think of a recent failure and tell me how it made you feel. How did those feelings influence your reaction to your failure?
- How do you think God wants us to respond to failures? Why?
- How can I help you deal with failures better? What do you think I need to do to respond to my own failures better?

**Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!**