

Teenagers Fail – Why It Matters



by Chris Hudson

The saying goes “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” This is not traditional parenting advice, nor is it perfect parenting advice, but it wouldn’t hurt this generation of teenagers if it got a bit more of an airing. Parenting teenagers with the goal of keeping them happy or preventing them from enduring any form of hardship is not a beneficial one, despite the prevailing sentiment of much modern parenting. In fact, it runs counter to the process of raising someone to be a well adjusted adult, able to live a life of meaning and purpose.

I imagine most of you who read this are nodding your heads. Yet I get the sense the prevailing sentiment of 21st century parenting and education focuses a great deal on the achievement, success, and praise of young people. I can’t help but feel there is an increasing aversion to risk and less tolerance of failure than there has been in the past.

This article is a brief attempt to wave the flag for a less controlled and more holistic approach to raising teenagers. It is a little reminder for us all that failure, mistakes and disappointment play an important and inevitable role in life, and therefore should be allowed for and acknowledged rather than avoided and downplayed.

Why Parents Don’t Let Teenagers Fail

I doubt there are many parents who set out to undermine their kid’s learning opportunities. Approaches to parenting styles are influenced by a host of factors. Amidst all the advice, emotion, and business of family life it is easy for parenting approaches and motivations to get a bit confused.

Misunderstanding Effective Parenting

One of the biggest issues facing today’s teenagers is what their parents believe about effective parenting. Most parents are trying so hard to raise their kids the absolute best way they can, but are being lead astray by some ill-informed, but good sounding, parenting principles.

Let me make one thing very clear, doing all you can to protect your teenager from discomfort or disappointment is NOT effective parenting. The role of a parent is to prepare their teenager for adulthood. Protecting them from setbacks or sadness does not equip them to handle life as an adult, rather it sets them up for real struggles later in life.

Being an effective parent of teenagers requires discernment about when to step in and when to let events unfold. The older your teenager gets the less you should be stepping in. There will be times, such as if your teen is putting themselves or others in danger of physical harm, when it is appropriate to step in. However there will be many times when it is best just to let your teen

handle a situation their way, even when you know it will end in tears. Likewise saying no and sticking to it is just as, if not a more important part of being a good parent as saying yes is.

Protecting Your Own Feelings

It is the natural way of things for parents to feel pain when seeing their children in pain. This response forms an essential part of the protective instinct at the very core of parenting.

However like most good things, these protective instincts can be used inappropriately. When parents step in to prevent their teen from failing they can be motivated by the desire to protect themselves more so than the desire protect their teenager.

No parent likes to see his or her child hurting. But when parents intervene to protect their own feelings of helplessness or anxiety, they no longer have their teen's best interest at heart but rather their own.

Confused About Responsibility

Teenagers become good at shifting the blame. They put their new found thinking skills to good use and make their issues or faults everybody else's problem.

Distressed teenagers have little difficulty framing a problem as the result of some parental failure. But it is not just parents, a frustrated teenager will look to blame who ever is available as a means of denying their own liability

Usually parents are easy targets. Parents, who are already dealing with various degrees of guilt about their perceived parental inadequacies, are susceptible to feeling responsible for their teenager's distress and are inclined to try and make it right.

This type of confusion is understandable, but counter productive. When parents learn to determine who owns a particular problem they find not only does parenting become easier but their teenagers become more responsible.

Next time your teenager makes an issue your problem, take a minute to consider if it really is your problem or if it belongs firmly in your teenager's court.

What Teenagers Learn From Failing

There are many benefits that are derived from failure and disappointment. I am sure each of us can look back on some of our less successful moments and identify how they have helped us become a stronger, wiser, or a more whole person.

Just as we have all learned lessons the hard way, so too this generation of teenagers need to be able to learn some hard earned lessons as well. Here are some of the many lessons teens learn from their mistakes.

They Learn About Responsibility

Responsibility is the ability to act without guidance or external authority. This means responsibility requires internal motivation.

Internal motivation develops, as teens are held accountable for their actions – their successes and their failures. Allowing teenagers to be accountable when they make a mistake will cause them a degree of discomfort, and discomfort can be a great motivator.

Teaching teens responsibility requires parents both reward responsible decision and allow teens to experience the consequences of being irresponsible. Parents are generally pretty good at rewarding, but less inclined to let their teens learn from the consequences of their poor choices.

They Learn Coping Skills

When we make mistakes or things don't go our way it is only natural to feel any number of negative or unpleasant emotions; sadness, anger, hopelessness, frustration etc. These feelings are part of life, and we all have to learn to live with them. We all have to foster the ability to continue to function in life while feeling down.

Being able to manage negative feelings is an important coping skill for life. Young people learn how to handle these feelings only by being exposed to their own emotional responses to failure and disappointment. If they are shielded from these unpleasant experiences they do not develop the capacity to keep going when things go wrong, and end up falling apart at the slightest setback.

By allowing teenagers the chance to experience failure and discomfort you enable them to develop important coping skills, which they will call upon time and time again throughout life.

They Learn To Adapt

Life doesn't always go as planned. In order to live a full life we all need to learn how to change and adapt when things don't go as we had hoped. The capacity to adjust, improvise, reprioritise, compromise, and accommodate to changing scenarios is vital in a world that is changing at an unprecedented rate.

When we step in and either prevent teens from going through with plans that might fail, or to fix up a plan that has gone wrong, we inhibit their ability to learn how to adjust and adapt when things go wrong. Letting teenagers make mistakes allows them to discover their ability to roll with the punches and adapt to the unexpected.

They Learn Not to Fear Failure

In a world that is obsessed with teaching young people the *correct* way to do things, we risk creating a generation who are focused on not getting things wrong rather than on really understanding or exploring ideas.

Letting young people have the freedom to fail and to make mistakes empowers them to explore their creativity, to learn real lessons, and develop a deeper understanding of the world and who they are.

If we teach our young people the only thing that matters is not making mistakes we channel and restrict their thinking. They spend so much of their energy pleasing others and trying to conform that they lose their desire to create, dream, and discover new ways of seeing the world and themselves.

Let your teens know it is okay to fail. Encourage them to try out new things, and explore their ideas. Help them up when they get knocked over, and challenge them to try again.

Young people who are allowed to fail are the ones who will change the world and discover new and better ways of being and doing.

They Learn to Deal With Disappointment

Life is full of disappointments. There is no chance your teen will get through life without experiencing some sort of disappointment. Therefore preparing your teenager for independence is not achieved by shielding them from setbacks and failures, but rather by exposing them to the reality that things don't always turn out as hoped.

Young people who develop an outlook on life that factors in disappointment and acknowledges there will be challenging times, are far more likely to achieve their goals and find a degree of contentment than those who do not learn to expect disappointment as part of life.

Building up a tolerance for discomfort and disappointment equips young people to tolerate the push and shove of everyday life. The more conditioned they are to discomfort the more tolerant they will be handling the inconveniences of everyday life. They will generally be patient and more inclined to persevere calmly without constantly losing their cool.

They Learn Not to Feel Entitled

When we shield teenagers from disappointment or failure, they form an expectation they never have to feel anything unpleasant in life. This results in a sense of entitlement, whereby they believe they deserve success or happiness simply because they are who they are. If teens never have to face the consequences of their own weaknesses or mistakes they will form unhealthy expectations about life and relationships.

When teenagers accept responsibility for their failures, they learn to solve problems by acknowledging and dealing with them rather than by blaming others or using coercive power to get their own way.