

PFA Tips

Allow Your Child to Fail

As a parent, of course you never want your child to fail. And when you have a child with a disability you tend to take extra precautions to protect them. But is it possible we're doing more to hurt than help?

It's ok for your child to experience frustration

It hurts to watch your child struggle – with anything. And our kids with Autism struggle enough as it is. So why not do whatever we can to eliminate difficulties for them? Here's why. Because it's not possible for you to eliminate ALL sources of frustration for them. What is possible is for you to allow them to practice handling frustration in a controlled environment, beginning with small issues, such as struggling to open a container or read a paragraph at a particular grade level. Then build from the small issues to those that may present a greater challenge, again within this controlled environment. That will help prepare your child when a difficult situation arises in an uncontrolled environment.

Let your child make decisions

How do you learn good judgment? Through failures and mistakes. If we don't give our kids opportunities to stumble and make mistakes, we're not allowing them to have the experiences they need to learn good decision-making skills. Experiencing failure builds resilience and teaches them critical traits in bouncing back,

changing how they do something, and trying again.

Let them do it themselves

When we step in and do everything for our kids, we may be sending the message that we don't think they are capable to do things themselves. Have you really tested what your child can do on his own? You might be surprised. Give them the chance to experience success – even if it takes multiple times before getting it right.

Allow them to vent their frustration

Think about the last time you attempted to assemble furniture. Did you get frustrated? Were a few choice words flying out of your mouth? Was someone standing next to you telling you to keep your emotions in check? If someone were shushing me in that moment it might only infuriate me more. You certainly don't want to escalate the situation by telling your child his frustration isn't worthy of expression. Instead help teach him healthy frustration outlets.

Fear of failure only raises anxiety

Lots of children with Autism struggle with anxiety issues. Indiana University



reported 40% of children age 18 and younger with ASD had at least one comorbid diagnosed anxiety disorder, (van Steensel et al., 2011). If our children grow up with the impression that failure is always a negative thing that could create even more anxiety as they try anything, sometimes at all costs, to avoid failure.

Your missteps may be different, but we've all been there

Let your child know that they aren't the only person to experience missteps and setbacks. Share a time (or two, or three...) that something did not go the way you intended. Not only will it help them understand that they aren't the only person to deal with this unpleasant emotion, but it also lets them know that failure occurs for ALL people – with and without disabilities. It will reinforce that the failure isn't a result of having Autism – it's a result of being human.

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Allow Your Child to Fail – cont.

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Be a cheerleader, well... maybe

While your child is struggling with a task, your instinct may be to tell them, “I know you can do it!” That may feel like genuine encouragement, but it may also be putting undue pressure on them, as they worry about not living up to your standard if they do fail. Instead, try empathy. “I can see this is difficult.” Or, “I know you are disappointed that this did not turn out the way you may have expected.” Let them know you are there if they want to request assistance.

Coping vs perseverating on the stumble

Ever say the absolute wrong thing to a group of people and then play it over and over again in your head all day? Our kids may get “stuck” on the experience that didn’t go too well. They may have difficulty sorting through their thoughts and processing what has occurred or considering courses of action to help them not repeat the mistake in the future. So how do you help pull them out of the perseveration and switch gears? Here are a few strategies to try:

- Talk with them to help them

process the situation

- Try using a visual to redirect their attention such as a picture of an object they may be passionate about (ex., dogs)
- Begin a game to get them engaged in another activity to redirect thoughts
- Sing a song and ask them to join in

Yes, your child may absolutely have a meltdown over the failure

Which I’m sure has you wondering why I would ever in my right mind still suggest you permit your child to experience mistakes and failures. It’s because the meltdown doesn’t lessen the value of the learning experience. Think about these de-escalation strategies before your child feels he/she has hit a crisis point:

- Act in a calm manner – your actions could escalate the situation if you react by yelling, throwing objects, etc.
- Make the environment calm – remove loud noises, turn down bright lights, etc.
- Make the environment safe – remove objects your child could use to hurt himself or others
- Keep soothing objects on hand –

keep items close at hand that you know help calm your child such as weighted blankets or vests, fidget items, favorite stuffed toys, etc

- Make a safe space – some people react well to being inside a small tent with their favorite belongings

Something to consider when you are with an adult on the Autism spectrum who is experiencing a meltdown. Many adults with Autism say they need to let the meltdown run its course and ask that others not try to engage with them during the meltdown.

Our kids won’t stop loving us because we let them experience failure

They also won’t love us more because we do everything for them and keep them in a padded bubble. The best we can do is to let them know our love for them is unconditional and that we will provide a safe place for them to experience setbacks and that we will be there to help them cope with the associated emotions.

Additional Resources

Pathfinders for Autism Online Provider Database
<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>
 Choose category > Mental Health and Counseling

Let’s Talk About Feeling Defeated by Joy Berry
 Available on Amazon

Anxiety and Autism Spectrum Disorders
<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/anxiety-and-autism-spectrum-disorders>

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