

# ***The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed***

by Jessica Lahey

## **Book Group Discussion Guide**

### **Chapter 1: Brief History of American Parenting**

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#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

Chapter one of *The Gift of Failure* details the evolution of American parenting, how cultural shifts have affected parenting practices, and how we ended up where we are today, a society of worried, overly-directive parents with anxious, emotionally dependent children.

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1. Jessica Lahey opens with reference back to a favorite childhood book, *Little House on the Prairie*, set in the early nineteenth century when parenting was far less complex. How would you compare your experience in parenting to your parents', a mere generation ago? How have the challenges of parenting changed over the last several decades?
2. According to John Locke, "Children were meant to be seen and not heard, and to always behave in the best interest of the family." How has the American parenting philosophy changed since Locke's era?
3. The 1970's brought inflation, independence, and more choices for women. What decisions around working inside and/or outside the home do you recall women making in your family at that time? Have these decisions impacted today's parents? How?
4. The self-esteem movement promised that we could feel good about ourselves and our parenting while we maintain friendships with our children. Discuss the tension between wanting our children to be our friends while teaching them to be competent, responsible, organized adults.

## Chapter 2: Why Parenting for Dependence Doesn't Work: The Power of Intrinsic Motivation

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Avoid getting caught up in the everyday emergencies of family life by focusing on your long-term parenting goals. What do you want your children to be able to do by themselves in six months? A year? Five years?
  - If you'd like your child to be less interested in learning, pay him for his grades.
  - Extrinsic rewards don't work over the long term because humans perceive them as an attempt to control behavior.
  - Intrinsic motivation is a key factor in helping children become autonomous, competent and connected adults.
  - Self-imposed goals are the safest place for kids to fail.
  - Competence is not the same as confidence. Confidence is empty optimism, while competence is confidence combined with ability and experience.
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1. American society has trained children to value points, high scores and rewards over the process of learning. This fixation on extrinsic rewards has resulted in an intense fear of failure and has destroyed many children's love of learning. Why do you think society has become so fixated on points and scores rather than learning?
2. What is the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators? What are some examples of each?
3. What kind of motivators do you use in your own home? Why?
4. What other options do you have if you don't bribe, nag, or impose punishment in order to get kids to do what we want them to do?
5. What three factors did Edward Deci establish as keys for developing intrinsic motivation?
6. What is the difference between autonomy and independence?
7. What happens when autonomy is given but no rules or limits are imposed by parents?
8. What are bribes or rewards good for? What will bribes never work for in the long-run? What are the biggest drawbacks for bribes or rewards?
9. How do you model constructive and adaptive response to failure in your family?

10. What are the best type of goals for a child to set? What are the benefits of your child setting a goal? Who should own the goal?
11. Ironically, the more autonomy you give your child, the greater her competence will develop and ultimately, the stronger her connectedness to you will grow. What are two or three ways you can step back today to help give her more autonomy?
12. Stanford University psychologist and *Mindset* author Carol Dweck divides people into two mindsets: fixed or growth. Discuss the differences between the two mindsets.
13. What is your own mindset? What mindset do you model for your child?
14. What are desirable difficulties as described by psychologists Elizabeth and Robert Bjork? Why are desirable difficulties important in learning?
15. If you have a child who is afraid to fail, what is the last thing he saw you fail while doing? Did you discuss it with him afterwards? How did that discussion go?

## Chapter 3: Less Really is More: Parenting for Autonomy and Competence

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Autonomy-supportive parenting is not negligent parenting and it is not permissive parenting.
  - Kids react favorably to parents who hold them accountable without offering bribes, rewards, excessive monitoring or pressure.
  - Charles Duhigg, the author of *The Power of Habit*, explains that habits come out of a basic loop: a cue, the routine and the reward.
  - To create a new habit requires creating a new cue, establishing a new routine which is tied to that cue and then finding an appropriate reward for the routine to close the feedback loop.
  - Parents tend to think of unsolicited advice and direction as “helping” but children hear it as “nagging.” Unfortunately, nagging serves as an assault on their autonomy, lack of faith in their competence, and ultimately it will undermine your connection with your child.
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1. Limits provide structure for children and make them feel safe and cared for. What are some limits you have established in your home?
2. Do you see yourself as a controlling parent or an autonomy-supportive parent? Give examples.

## **Chapter 4: Encouragement from the Sidelines: the Real Connection Between Praise and Self-esteem**

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### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- All praise is not equal.
  - If we lavish praise on our children for inherent qualities in an attempt to bolster their self-esteem, we can actually undermine self-esteem and create mistrust.
  - When we praise kids for effort while supporting their learning, they will be more likely to have a growth mindset.
  - Kids with a growth mindset are more likely to ask questions, ask for help, and take on intellectual and emotional challenges, while kids with a fixed mindset are more likely to hide gaps in their knowledge, reject challenge, and cheat.
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1. What is self-efficacy and why is it essential for growth?
2. What are the six ideas Lahey offers to help children adopt a growth mindset and an improved sense of self-efficacy?

## Part II

### Learning from Failure: Teaching Kids to Turn Mistakes into Success

#### Chapter 5: Household Duties: Laundry as an Opportunity for Competence

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##### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When we desire to show affection or need to prove our own parenting successes, we deny our children the opportunity to be full members of the family with their own duties and responsibilities.
  - When we step in and rescue our children, we deny them opportunities to learn.
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1. How can you help your child grow his resolve and resourcefulness?
2. Parenting coach Amy McCready encourages parents to eliminate the word *chores* and replace it with 'family contributions.' Why? In what ways does your kid contribute to your family?
3. Lahey gives six ways you can help your child build resolve and resourcefulness in the home. Which ones are you effectively supporting and which ones could use some more attention?

## Chapter 6: Friends: Accomplices to Failure and the Formation of Identity

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Psychologist and author Judith Harris argues that parents matter much less in the development of our children's nature than we'd like to believe, and that peers, not parents, shape much of our children's behavior and experience of the world.
  - As children grow into adolescence, it's important to view friendships for what they are, opportunities for your children to experiment with other personalities, identities and choices.
  - Rather than dictate who your children may associate with, make your home a comfortable gathering place for your children and their friends.
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1. Parents matter much less in the development of our children's nature than we'd like to believe, according to psychologist Judith Harris. Explain why peers effect our children's development of their behavior and experience of the world.
2. Do you have rules in your home for "fighting fair"? If so, what are they?
3. In the teen years, what happens when you don't show trust and give space to your teenager and allow him to make good choices on his own? How can you support your teen without being overly controlling or directive?

How do you model positive, healthy friendships? Discuss with your teen who your good friends are and what characteristics you admire most about them. Ask her what characteristics she looks for in a good friend? What are her limits for unhealthy or risky behavior?

4. What does Lahey suggest you do if you are concerned for your child's health and safety?

## Chapter 7: Sports: Losing as an Essential Childhood Experience

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- What are some benefits of being involved in sports?
  - How have youth sports changed in the last twenty-five years and how do these changes undermine the positive aspects?
  - When college athletes were asked to reflect on the worst memory from playing youth and high school sports, the overwhelming response was, “The car ride home from games with my parents.” Why do you think this is?
  - Parents anchor the family and provide support through the ups and downs of youth sports by showing up and supporting their children’s growth as people and as athletes. How effective are your parenting skills in this area?
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1. Sports psychologist Terry Orlick refers to youth sports programs as “failure factories.” Is this an accurate characterization? What family values do you instill for your children around organized youth sports? Do you believe everyone should be a winner? Why or why not?
2. What attributes make the most supportive and effective sports parents?
3. As a sports parent, have you ever felt the fight or flight response of the “Pressured Parents Phenomenon”? What triggered it? How did you deal with it in the moment and how can you be prepared the next time it happens?



## Chapter 8: Middle School: Prime Time for Failure

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Middle school demands feats of organization, planning, time management and shifts in focus that young adolescents are not capable of mastering, at least not all at once.
  - Executive function is the collection of skills and mental processes that allow us to manage our time, resources and attention in order to achieve a goal.
  - Don't blame executive function deficits on a lack of intelligence. Brain development and intelligence are two very different things.
  - The key to developing executive functioning skills is to try a strategy, fail, suffer the consequences, come up with another strategy based on what worked and what did not, and try again.
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- 1) What formula does Lahey give for helping your child develop executive function skills?
- 2) Lahey gives three techniques that can help kids gain some self-control and awareness of their own patterns of disruptive or distracting behaviors, including, agreeing on a signal, the pencil game and FER: flag, eye contact, and rehearse. Which one of these strategies might you try with your child?
- 3) What suggestions does Lahey give to help your child become better organized. When organization strategies go wrong, how will you handle it, and what support will you give your child next time?

## Chapter 9: High School and Beyond: Toward Real Independence

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When kids are not allowed to fall and pick themselves up, they never learn how to tolerate disappointment, manage their relationships, take responsibility for themselves, or cope with the frustration of not getting what they want.
  - Until we step back and allow teenagers to live their own lives, survive their own failures and earn their own triumphs, they won't get a chance to experience their own sense of competence.
  - Lahey outlines the challenges inherent in each year of high school that can serve as opportunities to help your teen try, fail, recover, and try again. Encourage your child to take advantage of them all.
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1. Are you currently giving your child the space and opportunity to learn, fail, recover, and move on? If so, what is working well for you? If not, how could you step back and allow your child some space?
2. Think of a time when you did step out of the way and your child was able to problem solve on her own. What was the outcome? What impact did this have on her self-esteem?
3. As your adolescents make their way through high school, how can you show your support for their good decisions?
4. What role should you play in your child's college application process?
5. What are the seven autonomy-supportive ways you can support your child as they head off to college?

## **Chapter 10: Parent-Teacher Partnerships: How Our Fear of Failure Undermines Education**

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### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The most successful parent-teacher relationships happen when the teacher feels supported by the parent, the parent feels supported by the school, and the students understand that home and school are a united front.
  - Decades of research shows that positive family-school relationships are vital to student success.
  - Lahey gives twenty in-depth autonomy-supportive strategies which can help you create a positive partnership with teachers and administrators from the very first day of school.
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1. What does Lahey consider to be the best-case scenario when it comes to a parent-teacher partnership?
2. What is lost when a teacher is barred by a parent from letting their child fail and learn from the consequences of their mistakes?

## Chapter 11: Homework: How to Help Without Taking Over

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Homework is your child's job, not yours.
  - Homework is valuable information for your child's teachers, so prioritize the information of incorrect answers over parent-created perfection.
  - Children learn the most about sticking with a task when it's hard. Homework that is challenging is more valuable from a learning perspective than easy homework, so help your child through their frustration and resist the urge to take over.
  - Remember those long-term goals around competence, and think about how proud your child will feel when she finishes the work herself.
  - Your job is to support, encourage and redirect.
  - Don't prevent your child from missing out on all of those desirable difficulties that will really solidify the skills she is supposed to learn by completing the assignment or project on her own.
  - Give your child clear expectations and consequences, then step back and provide room to learn.
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1. What skills can your child develop when homework is not easy or does not turn out exactly as planned?
2. If our long-term goals for our kids include developing a growth mindset, autonomy, competence, mastery and more comfort around frustration, what are some of the practical steps you can work through with your child to help him learn to organize, strategize and take responsibility for his homework?
3. If homework is creating strife, how can you help your child take ownership of the task?
4. What are the benefits of working through homework temper tantrums?
5. What are desirable difficulties as they relate to homework? What are the benefits of allowing your child to experience them?

## Chapter 12: Grades: The Real Value of a Low Score

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Grades are extrinsic rewards for academic performance. Extrinsic rewards undermine motivation and long-term learning. Ergo, grades undermine motivation and long-term learning.
  - Keep grades in perspective. They are not a measurement of your child's worth and are often not even an accurate measurement of her ability.
  - Emphasize your child's personal goals over grades.
  - As your children set their goals, model the same by setting some of your own.
  - Keep report cards off the refrigerator and social media.
  - Be wary of grading software portals.
  - Focus on the process of learning rather than the end product of grades.
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1. Grades are extrinsic rewards for academic performance. As unappealing as they are we can't take them away. How does Lahey advise "playing the game"?
2. What advice do teens have for parents when talking about grades? What are the benefits of emphasizing goals rather than grades?
3. Focusing on communicating constructive feedback rather than scores is important because it gives context as to what can be improved upon and how. What ways can you support your child's teacher in giving more constructive feedback?
4. How can you support a growth mindset when it comes to your kid's report card? Which classes did he study really diligently for and was able to get a solid grade for his effort? Which classes did he do no work for but got an A? Discuss with your child which one he feels better about and why.
5. How do you feel about having access to a school grading portal? How can you most effectively team up with your child to use it in support of her?
6. Failure is a gift. When was the last time you celebrated one of your own failures with your child? Did you explain what happened and model your own adaptive response?
7. What is contingent self-worth? What happens when someone feels that their success in life is contingent on whether they succeed or fail in a certain domain?
8. Why is the gift of failure one of the most difficult yet important gifts your child can ever receive? Now that you've read the book, what ideas come to mind in helping your child to continue to internalize the understanding that failure is the key to success.