The Gift of Failure (5-17-18)

Friends: Accomplices to Failure and the Formation of Identity

The dad running back and forth between the play structure and the sandbox meant well, we could tell. But watching him work himself up into a sweaty lather was exhausting, even from a distance. My friend and I watched from our bench in the shade, quietly nibbling our children's cheddar crackers, diverted by his feats of extravagant overparenting.

One of his children, a girl of about six, was playing in the sandbox with my friend's daughter and two other girls. They were playing well together, but there was the usual jockeying for power going on between them, and they occasionally erupted in shouting as they fought over the coveted roles in their communal game. His other child, a toddler, was gleefully testing the limits of his strength and agility, repeatedly attempting to pursue a much older child up a slippery slide.

Both of his children were having a grand time in the moments they were allowed to play on their own. The father, however, was nearly apoplectic with worry. He could not simultaneously supervise details of both children's play, so he ran back and forth between the two, sometimes towing the toddler under his arm as the boy screamed in protest. Every time the girl's voice rose to a shout, or one of the other girls shouted at her, the father rushed in to sort out their issues, soothe, or bribe the girl with the promise of a snack if she would "just play nice." When one of the other girls spoke harshly to his daughter, his eyes swept the crowd, searching for backup in the form of the other girl's parents. My friend wisely kept her mouth shut and averted her eyes when he looked in her direction. Meanwhile, his toddler seized on the opportunity of his father's momentary inattention to run back to the slide, which made the father so nervous that he abandoned the management of his daughter and ran back across the playground for round two.

I can only imagine how tiring and stressful the "play" session was for that dad. As for the kids, I can't imagine they enjoyed all his meddling. They seemed to have fun in the fits and starts, but as soon as they gathered momentum and the play took on a life of its own, it was shut down due to noise or conflict. What that overwrought father did not understand as he struggled to manage his kids' every move was that he was defeating the very purpose of their playtime.

Our children's social lives begin in infancy when they gaze up at our faces and mirror our smiles or convey the soggy discomfort of a wet diaper with a wailing cry. Once those babies move beyond the close company of their parents and venture into relationships with other children, however, they begin a lifelong

education in rules of social conduct and the vocabulary of the subtle cues human beings use to communicate with each other. Fluency in the language of human social interaction will determine the success of all their future relationships, and failure to develop fluency is a significant handicap in life.

Much of the foundation for this fluency is taught through free play with other children. In her book The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do, psychologist Judith Harris argues that parents matter much less in the development of our children's nature that we would like to believe, and that peers, not parents, shape much of our children's behavior and experience of the world. Peers teach our children hoe to interact and negotiate with other people, and this education starts in the sandbox, where children learn to play cooperatively, respond to the needs of others, and construct their own imaginary worlds. Play is a vital part of human development for many reasons: board games teach logic and planning; making forts spatial and construction skills; basketball pickup games teamwork. But the most important lessons of play and friend time are interpersonal, and these lessons are best learned when uninterrupted and free of adult manipulations and machinations. Adults should give kids the space and freedom to learn this language and work out tough social moments for themselves, because those fights, tussles, silent treatments, and breakups are, despite the tears and heartbreak they cause, invaluable opportunities for growth. The social conflicts of childhood are all part of our education in human relationships, and failure to negotiate also provides its own lessons. Squabbles are opportunities to be valued, not emergencies to be managed. That father on the playground leapt in to intervene at the first sign of discord, and in doing so, short-circuited each one of those potential lessons. Children used to play on their own, away from the eyes of parents, ad were allowed to work out these social dynamics free of parental interference. No longer.

...Children develop empathy by seeing and hearing other people's reactions and emotions, and when we don't allow our children to experience the full brunt of those uncomfortable moments, we deny them glimpse into the consequences and impact of their action son others. One missed lesson in a sandbox is no big deal, of course, but when that child grows up under the wing of parents who continue to rescue – from playground dust-ups, to tween misunderstandings, and the inevitable volatility of adolescent friendships – that child becomes an adult with no clue how to negotiate, placate, reason with, and stand up to other adults.

Andrea Nair, a psychotherapist and parenting coach, explains further in an email:

The cost of over-parenting is that the child does not develop the skills to fight back, speak up or get the hell out of the way. If a child is taught by their parents that an adult will swoop in and fight for them or save them from any form of challenging situation, that child will keep expecting that to happen and not look for solutions to help herself. That child will also not learn valuable communication skills that are necessary during the heat of emotional flooding during an argument.

If the emotional and social benefits of not swooping in to rescue kids from conflict are not sufficient to convince you, how about this: the ability to enjoy uninterrupted and unrestricted free play is also predictive of academic success.