

The Gift of Failure (excerpt 3-8-18)

Guideline #1

Controlling parents give lots of unsolicited advice and direction.

That's not the right way to load the dishwasher. Always wash the plates before putting them in and stack all the large plates on the left side. Don't leave the dishes in the sink and come back later. Do it this way. Do it now. Do it later.

We all have our own way of doing household chores so there's every possibility that your child may not load the dishwasher precisely as you'd like it done. Unsolicited advice and direction, commonly known as "helping" from a parent's perspective or "nagging" from the child's, interfere with her sense of autonomy, convey a lack of faith in her competence, and, because it's irritating and upsetting to both of you, undermines your connection.

When the child who loaded those food-laden plates into the dishwasher unloads the dishwasher, she will discover that crusty food on the plate, and you will have the opportunity then to explain how to prevent that mistake in the future. Offer guidance when the child is stuck, and seize the big learning moments, but otherwise hold your tongue. The mistakes she makes and corrects on her own are learning moments. The mistakes you anticipate don't benefit anyone, save for you in that brief moment when it makes you feel better that the plates are stacked north-south instead of east-west.

Guideline #2

Controlling parents take over.

I'll just do it, you go play. We have to get to school, I'll just do it myself when I get home. No, not that way, just let me do it.

Sometimes it's just easier to take over, particularly, if you are under a time crunch or exhausted. Remember, the goal is for children to learn how to do it for themselves, not for the task to get done. Sometimes it's going to be more important to be a minute late, particularly when a child masters something he's been struggling with. Step back, breathe, and remember what's really important in the big picture.

Guideline #3

Controlling parents offer extrinsic motivators in exchange for behaviors.

You get one jelly bean for every toy you clean up. If you're a walk the dog every morning, I'll buy you new sneakers. If you load and unload the dishwasher for an entire week without being asked, I will get you that video game you've been asking for.

As long as you keep rewards to a minimum and space them out, it's fine to celebrate or acknowledge in some way a child's accomplishment on the way to a more autonomous self. But many basic household responsibilities, such as walking the dog or taking out the garbage, should be viewed as part of family maintenance, not as endeavors deserving of hoopla or a grand reward. Everyone should contribute to what needs to be done around the house, and rewarding these kinds of basic activities suggests that doing them is heroic as opposed to expected.

Guideline #4

Controlling parents provide solutions or the correct answer before the child has had a chance to really struggle with the problem.

But honey, you know five times four is twenty, you just did that down here. I'll just look that word up for you while you do the spelling list. Just give me that pencil and I'll show you. Not like that, like this.

Not all answers come immediately. Give children time and silence to

think. Not only will it teach them to value quiet; it also shows them that you value the process of coming up with the answer as much as the answer itself.

Guideline #5

Controlling parents don't let children make their own decisions.

Do your math first, and then your spelling. Do your homework here at the table where I can see you. You should play tennis rather than baseball this season.

Sometimes it's better to allow your child to experience the ownership and rush of independence that comes from choosing one sport over another or one game over another, and that ownership is often more important than the activity. Decision-making is a complex process that takes a lot of practice, so give your child that opportunity to try on her autonomy for size.