**How to Raise Kids with Good Self-Esteem** By Andrew Postman

One of the best ways to boost kids’ self-esteem, permanently: Teach them how to handle flops.

The tennis club where Peter played was fed up with the talented boy's tantrums on the court. So were his parents. They agreed to suspend the 12-year-old for six months.

Howie, too, was a talented athlete. He played almost every sport — and whined in all of them when things didn't go his way. His friends, me included, couldn't change him, and his parents didn't seem to try. One afternoon, in a neighborhood baseball game, 12-year-old Howie tried to stretch a double into a triple and was easily tagged out. He protested, began to cry, and appealed to his teammates to join him in getting the call reversed. But we agreed with the ump. Howie turned purple with rage, took his ball and bats, and went home.

In the first case, Peter (not his real name) saw that the club and his parents meant business. After six months of being denied tennis, his greatest pleasure, Peter — real name Björn Borg — had learned a vital lesson. He grew up to be not only one of the greatest players in history, but a gentleman in victory and, yes, defeat.

In the second case, Howie (his real name, because I hope he reads this and recognizes himself for the jerk he was and may still be) never learned. His parents seemed to ignore or indulge his behavior, and his friendship with me and our teammates didn't survive the day we called him out at third base.

It's easy to see that the approach apparently taken by Howie's parents — ignoring bad behavior — is not an effective way to teach a kid how to lose gracefully. It's harder to know what is. We accept that success is just about impossible if you don't know how to use your flops. ("I have not failed 700 times; I have not failed once," Thomas Edison bristled when asked about the staggering number of false starts before he created a functioning lightbulb. "I have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways will not work.") But it's one thing to understand intellectually the bumper sticker truths about failing — what doesn't kill us makes us stronger; no one wins all the time — and another to embrace them when it's your kid who's hurting. "Which test am I supposed to want to see her fail so she can build character?" a friend says of her 13-year-old daughter. "Which boy do I want to not dance with her and break her heart because it'll be good for her in the long run?"

We want our kids to deal with loss or failure constructively — by evaluating why things turned out the way they did, asking themselves how they might do better next time, and ultimately bouncing back from the disappointment. At the same time, we want their suffering to be minimal. In striving for the latter, though, we may dilute their chance to learn resilience. "One of the main jobs of parents is building and protecting their children's self-esteem," says Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck, Ph.D., who studies how success is achieved. Unfortunately, she says, many parents today believe a good way to do this is to ignore their kids' failures or blame them on someone else. "It used to be that after a Little League game parents might say, 'When you struck out, maybe you didn't have your eye on the ball.' Now they're more likely to say, 'The umpire robbed you' " when there are problems. But the child who absorbs that lesson never learns to accept responsibility or withstand adversity. "Real protection," says psychologist Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., in her parenting guide, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee,* "means teaching children to manage risks on their own, not shielding them from every hazard."

You can help your child become a better risk manager — i.e., loser — by cultivating a proper outlook early, says Dweck. In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,* she describes two basic worldviews. People with a "fixed" mindset regard their qualities — IQ, personality, even moral character — as unchanging, carved in stone. "A fixed mindset creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over," she says. People with a "growth" mindset, on the other hand, view their basic qualities as improvable through effort and experience.

Depending on the mindset they develop with our help, children have vastly different reactions to failure and losing. "Confronted by failure, fixed-mindset kids fall apart or become very defensive," Dweck says. "They'll either feel really bad about failure, or run away from it." Children who've been encouraged to have a growth mindset, on the other hand, believe that they can try to do better. No, they're not happy about a failure or rejection. "But afterwards," Dweck says, "they think about what happened and what they can do to change the outcome next time."

To help your kid develop the growth mindset so that she can cope with and learn from — in short, succeed at — failure, consider these pointers from parents and parenting experts:

· **Praise the right things** Whether your kid comes home with an A or an F on a school paper, Dweck suggests, don't focus on the grade, but instead ask about what he or she learned. "Kids who are praised for effort and strategy remain engaged by challenge," she says. And if, even after hard work, she still comes home with a D? "Praise the effort, but acknowledge that the result might not be what the child had hoped for," Dweck says. "I would say, 'You really tried, but it looks like there are still things you don't understand. Let's talk about what you can do to get help.' "

Praise is merited, too, if a child falters after taking on a significant challenge — say, enrolling in a difficult class on a subject he's passionate about, but earning low marks, says psychologist Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D., executive director of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which gives scholarships to students from seventh grade through graduate school. "Focus not on the grade, but on his taking on this extraordinary challenge." Even if the school pressures him to get good grades, let him know you believe that in the long run accepting a challenge can be more important.

· **Clarify what constitutes "losing" or "failure"** How do you help your child see that victory or defeat is not the only, or ultimate, measure of success? "The more parents convey to their children that they value the process the kids engage in rather than the outcome," says Dweck, "the less the children will worry about losing or failing, the more readily they'll bounce back from it, and the more they'll learn from it. A parent could say, 'For me, a success is when someone prepares well for something they care about and then gives full effort to it. You did that.' " Dweck suggests this exercise: When the family is sitting around the dinner table, parents can ask, "Who did something really hard today? Who made a mistake they can learn from today? Who struggled with something today?" Mom and Dad must participate.

· **Don't sugarcoat** Everyone fails; you might as well put that on the table sooner rather than later. There are bound to be flubbed lines in the school play, or a pratfall at the ballet recital. When my younger son, Charlie, got his first taste of Little League pitching, he gave up a bunch of runs, including a grand slam. As the opposing players raced around the bases to score, my mind raced for the best way to salve his ego when the inning was finally over. In the meantime, his coach trotted out to the mound — sometimes the loneliest place on earth — put his hand on Charlie's shoulder, and said something to him. Whatever it was, my son stood tall and continued throwing hard strikes. Later, I asked the coach what he'd said. "I told him, 'So you got tattooed. Join the crowd.' "

Says Dweck: "To deny that things didn't go well is to send a very dangerous message — that mistakes or losses are so terrible that we can't talk about them. The most successful people know how to confront their failures and deficiencies and take steps to remedy them. That's what you need to teach your child. Say something like, 'Well, you lost the election. When you run again, do you think you'll prepare differently? What might you do next time to get more votes?' "

· **Leave your own hang-ups at the door** Sometimes, what we view as intolerable to our kids is really intolerable to us. Beth,\* a Philadelphia mom, was crushed when her 12-year-old wasn't chosen for her middle school's highly regarded orchestra. "It was really the first time in her life she didn't get what she wanted. I was devastated, and ready to intervene with the school. But before I could, she made the best of the situation and quickly became the proudest, most gung ho member of her French club. There were nights when I'd watch her sleeping and actually think, Why aren't *you* devastated? What's wrong with you that you're coping with this so effectively? I realized that I needed to separate her disappointments from mine, that I was confusing my childhood with hers." When you notice that you're more upset about a setback than your child is, Dweck suggests, consider what the failure means to you, and how that's different from what it means to her. Then remind yourself that she'll learn more from this experience if it's not about you, but about her and her growth.

· **Lend your kid some calm** Children throw temper tantrums when they lose (or for other reasons) because they're emotionally overwhelmed and unable to put their intense feelings into words. For 3- to 5-year-olds, that's normal; for 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds, it's more worrisome. As a parent, what do you do when your child, having been shut out of a prize at the talent show, morphs into the demon seed before your eyes? (That is, besides feel paranoid that every parent within earshot is judging you?)

"Let your child essentially borrow your control," advises Kutner. "First, if he's small, say 4 or 5, physically pick him up and move him, even if it's just three feet." (If he's too old to be carried, gently walk him elsewhere.) "That gives the message that you're in control. Talk calmly. Give him the words to put things into perspective. Say something like, 'It must be very frustrating right now.' Or 'You couldn't get what you wanted.' Most kids calm down very quickly."

Adds Atilla Ceranoglu, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist in the Boston area: "Distract and redirect. If the post-failure reaction is either too severe — crying, anger — or too stoic, then distract your child with something neutral: Offer her a snack, or suggest a different type of activity — walking, riding her bike, watching TV. Follow her lead. If she wants to talk about the loss, do so without overreacting but by gently exploring — asking questions like, 'What happened next?' and 'How did you feel then?' "

What a bad loser needs most, says educator Alfie Kohn, the author of *Unconditional Parenting,* is TLC. "The best way to immunize kids against the hurt of failure," he says, "is to let them know every day that we love them for who they are, not for what they do. They have to feel that our love for them doesn't diminish one bit when they screw up or fall short."