

The New York Times

Helping Kids Take Criticism Constructively (Even When It Isn't Constructive)

By **Jessica Lahey** October 2, 2014 9:07 am

Parents and teachers spend an enormous amount of time thinking about how to frame feedback for kids. We're torn between the desire to teach and the urge to protect children from pain. In an attempt to make feedback palatable, we dress it up in pretty outfits, sand down its sharp corners and construct feedback sandwiches of critical meat between slices of fluffy and comforting praise.

We all face criticism, both constructive and destructive, but how we deal with that criticism determines whether we persevere and learn from experience or crumple under the weight of our own self-loathing and despair. Receiving feedback is a skill, and like most skills, it requires practice, and a willingness to change and improve. Most children get plenty of practice. Ironically, adults need to help them make that practice count — by giving them feedback on how they handle criticism.

In the best guide I've found to learning this skill, "Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well," Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project explain that feedback — both positive and negative — is challenging because it hits us in the vulnerable soft spot between our desire to grow and our deep need to be accepted and

respected. The key to hearing feedback well, they argue, is to adopt what the psychologist and author Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset.” People with a growth mindset believe that effort and challenge make us better, stronger and smarter, while those with a “fixed mindset” believe that our inherent assets are static no matter what we do.

Not all of the criticism kids face is constructive. Some of it is born out of ulterior motives or dark intentions, but the good news is that a growth mindset can protect kids from this sort of feedback as well. As Mr. Stone and Ms. Heen explain:

“If you’ve got a growth identity, it’s easier to understand the mixed data. It’s information, not damnation. Instead of hearing ‘Last week I was competent; this week a screwup,’ you hear ‘Last week I was on top of things; this week I’m dropping balls.’ It’s not who you are, but something you did. Growth identity folks aren’t thrown by the contradiction and are motivated to seek accurate information in order to adjust and learn.”

A growth mindset is the best gift we can give our children. Thus armed, they can be brave in the face of constructive criticism, believing it can make them better, stronger and smarter. They won’t need us to dress it up or sand it down because, given a growth mindset, kids can handle the truth. When the worst happens, and malicious criticism comes their way, kids with a growth mindset will be able to focus on their own effort and progress rather than the expectations and limitations other people place on them.

It’s possible to parent and teach for a growth mindset. I consulted with Andrea Nair, a therapist and former teacher, and Michele Borba, a psychologist and author, on how we can help our children handle feedback with resilience and make it work for them.

Don’t hesitate to offer feedback. Many kids have trouble hearing

feedback because they don't experience it often enough. While it's natural to want to protect children from pain, when we protect our kids from criticism or focus excessively on praise, we push them toward a fixed mindset.

Back off on constant praise. A well-publicized study from earlier this year reported that effusive praise may encourage a fixed mindset and consequently discourage children from taking on new challenges. Worse, it can deflate, rather than shore up, self-esteem in some kids. Children need to get used to hearing constructive feedback, and it's our job to teach them how.

Watch your body language. Nonverbal communication is part of delivering feedback, and can help kids hear it more effectively. Uncross your arms, get down on kids' level, smile and keep your face relaxed. If you are tense when you hand out criticism, they will be tense when they receive it.

Switch up your pronouns. Instead of framing feedback in terms of "I'm so proud of you," turn the statement on its head and anchor feedback in the pronoun "you," as in, "You should be proud of yourself," or "What did you feel best about?" or "What one thing would you like to change?"

Empower for change. Cede control and hand power over to the child and help her adjust her efforts to use feedback effectively. Ask, "Is that how you'd hoped this would turn out?" or "What would you do differently the next time?" Help her see the way forward with comments like, "How do you think you could take this project from good to awesome?"

Formulate new goals after a big failure. Once she's picked herself up and dusted herself off, she may need help starting all over again. Help her pick some new goals based on what she's learned from the situation at hand. Her goals should be her own, devised by her, based on her experience and hope, and most importantly, they should be measurable and achievable so she can keep momentum moving forward.

Criticism comes to everyone, eventually. It's inescapable, and more

relevantly, it's a necessary part of growing up. As we can't protect children from it, the best we can do is ensure that they are equipped with the emotional fortitude and strength of character they will need to forge ahead, stronger, smarter and braver for the experience.

Jessica Lahey is an educator, writer and speaker and the author of "The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed." Find her at JessicaLahey.com.

Like what you're reading? Get the best of Motherlode articles, links, comments and conversation, along with previews of posts to come, delivered each week to your inbox. [Sign up here.](#)

© 2015 The New York Times Company