

**“Life is all about making mistakes and learning from them!”**  
**Developing Resiliency in Children**

At Harrisburg Academy, we strive to partner with parents to better ensure that each child can reach his or her full potential. As part of these partnerships, one of the most frequently asked questions teachers and administrators hear from parents is “How do I help my child succeed in school?”

Over the past couple of months I have spent time thinking about what my response to this question has been in the past and, more importantly, should it be any different now. For example, I have always believed every parent can help their child succeed in school by monitoring proper hygiene, nutrition and rest, communicating with their child regarding the child’s performance in and attitude toward school, providing an appropriate place and time for their child to do homework, and maintaining open and consistent communication with the child’s teacher(s).

I have always believed in giving advice to the parents of an individual student who has areas of weakness or needs more individualized support. I also believe that a student’s commitment and work ethic play a significant role in what success looks and feels like for that individual and, thus, some advice or suggestions should be included to address these issues.

However, a short while ago, I happened to notice the unattributed quote in the title of this article on a sign in one of our fourth grade classrooms and it triggered a realization for me. Should I be giving parents advice about choosing, at times, to do nothing to help their child succeed in school? When is it appropriate to do nothing?

As I began thinking of what advice I might give about doing nothing, I remembered an experience with a student with whom I worked earlier in my career. I was a residential counselor at a boarding school for students with learning disabilities. My role as residential counselor (also called “dorm parent”) was to provide a structured residential experience that supported the academic program of the school. In other words, I was the “parent” who set and enforced the rules which included bedtimes, chores, activity schedules and the all-important “free time.”

Like adolescents everywhere, the students at the school were interested in more freedom and independence. A group of students in my dormitory approached me and some of the other “dorm parents” about developing some sort of privilege system that would enable them to work toward being allowed more freedom in choosing a bedtime, having more of a choice for study hall locations including different levels of supervision, and other similar privileges. After several discussions, the process stalled. Not only had the discussions become mired in the debate between what is a privilege and what is a right but concerns were also being raised in terms of what possible negative impacts such changes in the residential structure might have on the academic success of the students.

In the midst of a very heated and animated discussion, a student who, for matters of discretion, I will call Jason raised his hand to speak. Jason was a rather shy student who was usually reticent to speak in front of any formal group so I was surprised with his willingness to speak. I was even more surprised at what he had to say. I must admit that I do not remember his exact words so I will be paraphrasing but I do remember his message.

Jason rose to speak and said “I don’t want to talk about what’s a privilege and what’s a right because I don’t think that is what’s important. I want to talk about what you keep telling us we are learning.” As this point all conversations seemed to stop. Jason continued “How do you expect us to know if we are learning what you are teaching if we don’t have a chance to use it. You keep telling us to practice what we learn so we get better but you don’t give us time to practice it! I have been learning study skills like how to organize my homework and how to plan out projects but I still have to be in a room with a teacher watching me all the time. How am I going to know if I can do it myself if there is always someone making sure I do it? Then Jason said something that changed the conversation for everyone involved. Jason asked “Shouldn’t you expect us to do these things. It shouldn’t be a privilege or a right to study in my room unsupervised. You should expect me to do it.”

I remember thinking then about the response I had always given parents about instilling responsibility in children by citing the example of shoe-tying. I am sure you have heard it. Once you have taught someone to tie their shoes, you expect them to do it themselves from then on. Jason’s statement now illuminated that simple concept in a much larger context.

Coincidentally, a number of recent articles featured in *Educational Leadership* and *Independent School Magazine* have discussed similar topics such as the positive and negative aspects of tutoring, student accountability and developing resiliency in children. In aggregate, the message from these articles is that children need to have responsibility placed on them and have the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. The dual benefits of a child learning not only that they can overcome adversity but that the adults around them believe in their ability to overcome adversity is very empowering. An adult believing in a child is one of the best ways to help them believe in themselves. Believing in one’s own ability to overcome adversity is the essence of resiliency.

As educators and parents, we have an obligation to place the responsibility for using the skills they are being taught on to the children learning them. It then stands to reason that we should provide an opportunity for children to use what they are learning independently. More importantly, do we not have an ethical and moral responsibility to convey our belief in a child’s ability? Isn’t the best way to convey that belief is by expecting children to use the skills they are learning or have learned? Jason thought so and so do I.

So in addition to my other advice to parents when they ask “How do I help my child succeed in school?” I am now adding “Do your children a big favor and expect things from them!”