

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality

Let Kids Sweat

“The worst thing you can do for those you love is the things they could and should do for themselves.” -- Abraham Lincoln

Tommy’s science project was a huge success. He won first place! But he didn’t feel successful. Instead, he saw his dad as being successful. That’s because his dad did most of the work. Tommy felt nothing but shame for attaining undeserved recognition and praise.

His father’s intentions came straight from the heart. He wanted nothing more than to bolster his son’s self-confidence. But his well-meaning efforts backfired. By taking over the project, he unintentionally conveyed to his son that he lacked faith in his boy’s capabilities. Tommy’s father ended up filling his son with self-doubt. Every time we do something for our children that they are capable of doing themselves, we handicap them.

A woman once told me that when she was a child, her mother fought her neighborhood battles for her. The woman lamented: “Instead of doing me a favor, she crippled a part of me. As a result, I grew up believing that I lacked the ability to take care of myself in such situations.”

Frederick Douglass, the slave who became an esteemed writer, said: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

Would babies ever learn to walk if parents abolished the lessons taught in the classroom we call “trial and error”? Instead of watching children struggle to their feet, what if we just picked them up and carried them everywhere they wanted to go? Would we be doing them a favor?

Are we doing a teenage son a favor by handing over money every time he asks for it? Wouldn’t earning it be more rewarding and strengthening?

When a 9-year-old asks how a particular word is spelled, are we really doing her a favor by supplying the answer? Wouldn’t looking up the answer be more rewarding, strengthening and character-building?

And what about the toddler engrossed in figuring out a new toy? It is so automatic for us to reach over and assist. And if the toy is a gift, very likely we spare the child the trouble—the struggle—of unwrapping it, even though the child seems utterly captivated by the challenge.

Overindulgence is the operative term here.

In the book [*Growing Up Again: Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children*](#), Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson illuminate how overindulgence is much more than just giving children too many things. They write that the overindulged child fails to master certain life skills such as “organizing, budgeting and carrying projects through to completion.”

In many cases, when the overindulging parent attempts to make things cushy for the child, a form of poverty results. Saved from having to stretch and struggle, the overindulged child is robbed of the opportunity to become sturdy, self-assured, capable and independent. I liken it to a couch-potato existence. Nothing gets exercised. The result is flimsy flabbiness.

Overindulgence stifles personal courage. Consequently, adults who were overindulged as children tend to avoid taking personal risks. Even if their current life circumstances are miserable, they’re too mortified and paralyzed by fearfulness, and they feel too incapable of trying out different possibilities or options.

And so for Tommy, clearly his father would have helped him most by stepping aside and allowing him to do the project himself. He could be involved, but in a completely different way. He would be there to offer advice when his son sought it, and he could provide ongoing encouragement.

To a child, encouragement means simply this: “Please have faith in me. Believe that I can do it.” Tommy needed to experience his father’s confidence and trust in his abilities to perform the task with minimal assistance. Instead of shielding his son from failure, Tommy’s father should have been preparing him for it. One way he can do this is by teaching his son a philosophy similar to that of the blind mountain climber, Eric Weinhenmayer: “The first steps to success are failure.”

In the final analysis, when parents refrain from overindulging, they empower and strengthen their children. As a result, they’re likely to grow into strong, confident, self-reliant and responsible adults. Conversely, when parents try to make life easier for their children, they actually make life harder for them.

Compassion often entails letting someone struggle. Had Tommy’s father taken that route, there’s no assurance that Tommy would have won first place. But one thing is certain: Tommy would have been spared the shame he felt over unearned recognition. Instead he would have felt the pride of doing it himself. For Tommy, that was the real prize.