

Episode 79. Kids and Failure

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SPEAKERS

Deana Thayer, Kira Dorrian, Future Focused Parenting



Deana Thayer 00:00

Here's what I don't like about it, is we talk all the time about pulling apart feelings and behavior. This is an example of pulling apart the behavior and the person. For me, I think sometimes failure quits representing the thing that didn't work out and people believe it represents them. So instead of, I did something that didn't go well, it's, I'm a failure. And I think we really have to work as parents to separate those in a big way to help our kids navigate this well.



Future Focused Parenting 00:30

What happens when two parent coaches, one a Christian and the other an agnostic Jew, sit down to talk about parenting? They take their listeners from surviving to thriving. I'm Deana Thayer, and I'm Kira Dorrian. Welcome to Raising Adults, a podcast brought to you by Future Focused Parenting.



Kira Dorrian 00:53

Oh, hi, everyone. And welcome back to another episode of Raising Adults podcast. Thank you so much for being with us again this week. And if you are new, welcome to the show. Normally, I say welcome to the laundry room. But given COVID, Deana and I are not together. So I'm in my laundry room and Deana's in her bonus room. And so we welcome you to all the rooms. Thanks for, thanks for being with us today. We are excited. We're

going to talk about kids and failure today. And wow, what a hugely important and impactful topic, don't you think?

D

Deana Thayer 01:28

Oh, absolutely. Because it's a universal, everyone will experience it. And to me, our response to it is really what determines how well we end up coping as we become adults. And so I think it's pretty critical to talk about in the context of a parenting podcast.

K

Kira Dorrian 01:45

Absolutely. Well, and I think too, so much of how we fail in adulthood is shaped by how we were experiencing failure and how our own failures were responded to in childhood.

D

Deana Thayer 01:56

Sure.

K

Kira Dorrian 01:57

And so it's such a foundational and fundamental time. And we talked with Alexandra Eidens from Big Life Journal about growth mindset. And that's really linked to this, right, like this turning this concept of failure on its head. And how do we do that? And that episode is, is wonderful. But I think it's important that we kind of talk a little bit about it together as well.

D

Deana Thayer 02:16

For sure. And I do think for those of you who haven't heard that episode, it would be a great supplement to this in terms of thinking about the way we approach this mentally. And how do we teach our kids to do that? So if you haven't caught that episode, definitely check out; when we had Alexandra on she was really helpful. And I, but I'm glad we're getting to talk about this piece of it and take a little deeper dive because how we respond to this as parents when our children are younger, I really think impacts how they respond to their own failures as they grow.

K

Kira Dorrian 02:48

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. So you want to start with your why?

D

Deana Thayer 02:53

I'd love to. And I said to Kira even before we started recording and when we were talking about this topic that for me, this topic really dovetails with self talk, because I also think the way we speak to ourselves about our mess ups is really important. And so my why is about that. Just to lay the foundation, I've generally had pretty negative self talk from about my, I'd say early teen years on and so I think those tapes we play in our head or those scripts that we run through over and over in terms of how we talk about ourselves to ourselves, really impact this. And so because historically I haven't done a great job of speaking positively to myself in my own mind, it was important to me to create a more positive script for my children. And I think how we speak to ourselves impacts how we then view our actual physical or logistical mistakes in the world. And so that became really important to me, because it's really an area where I would say, I haven't, I haven't done great myself personally. But I have this really unique opportunity to do a good job of it as a parent and hopefully impact the way my kids run that script in their own minds. Because we do we tend to play tapes over and over. And once those scripts are kind of set, they can really develop some mental ruts for us that are pretty hard to climb out of. So that's really what was driving this for me. How about you?

K

Kira Dorrian 04:20

Well before I share my why I do want to let our listeners know that I have a woodpecker on my roof today and he or she is making a racket so if you hear a rather obnoxious sound, it's my woodpecker. Um, so there we go. For me, I think this really comes back to my overarching why, um, you know of having mentally healthy and happy kids who could turn into mentally healthy and happy adults. And I can say, you know, upside down and sideways how all the studies show that you know, the people who are really successful are the ones who can embrace their failure and learn from it and blah blah blah. And, and whilst of course, I hope my kids are successful, that's just not the core for me. The core is, I really think that our failures define us, but not in the ways that we tell ourselves, they should. I think society teaches us that our failures define us in terms of the failure themselves. I actually think we're defined by how we cope with the failure, what we get from the failure and what we choose to learn from it. So that's what I wanted for my kids was for them to accept which I love that you said this, you know, my phrase, right? You can't get through life without failing, it's literally impossible. And so they're going to hit it time and time and time again. And I wanted the experience of failure for them to be something that even though it's uncomfortable, that they've learned to go, okay, this is uncomfortable, but it doesn't define me. The failure itself doesn't define me; what I do with it is how I'm defined. And that that would then lead to them feeling mentally healthy and happy instead of feeling like a failure. Does that make sense?

D

Deana Thayer 06:00

Oh, absolutely. And I couldn't agree more. And I think that's where the mind piece element also comes in. Because they're also defined by, the way they respond to that failure is what matters. But that starts with, how do I myself think about this failure? And so so much of this is laid in the foundation of our thought patterns. And we as parents have an important job there, especially with younger children in setting up how this is dealt with.

K

Kira Dorrian 06:31

Well, and it's fascinating because it has such a negative connotation. It's really interesting. It's like one of those vocabulary words that has so much attached to it. But we really could just turn it on its head completely, like failure doesn't have to be a bad thing. It can be a completely normal thing, because it is completely normal. And so we get to as parents kind of control the narrative of what that word means, somewhat. And so we really need to do the best we can, especially because I think the narrative the world throws at our kids is not that way at all. And that's one of the things I'm struggling with, and I'll talk about today, but is no matter what I do at home, the reality is they have a narrative coming in from the world. And that, unfortunately, because they don't live in a bubble, affects them. And so there's this like, push pull of what they're hearing from me and their teachers, and then what they're hearing from the world. And that's tricky.

D

Deana Thayer 07:27

Absolutely. And we talk all the time about leading with vocabulary. And I will be frank that I don't care for the word failure. And I, while I agree that we can help turn that phrase on its head and do our best, at least at home, to change how we frame that, because of how it's viewed in the larger world, it's technically, we're fighting kind of an uphill battle. I think with that we're definitely going to be swimming upstream. And I still wish myself that it were used less in a lot of contexts. I know myself having come from the birth world, one of my least favorite terms in labor is failure to progress.

K

Kira Dorrian 08:11

Yes!

D

Deana Thayer 08:12

I don't like this idea of telling a laboring mom that she's a failure at having her baby. And so I, it's just, it's one of those things like, you're absolutely right Kira this, this word, overall,

fairly ubiquitously, is viewed pretty horribly. It basically, and here's what I don't like about it is we talk all the time about pulling apart feelings and behavior. This is an example of pulling apart the behavior and the person. For me, I think sometimes failure quits representing the thing that didn't work out, and people believe it represents them.

K

Kira Dorrian 08:46

Yes!

D

Deana Thayer 08:47

So instead of, I did something that didn't go well, it's, I'm a failure. And I think we really have to work as parents to separate those in a big way to help our kids navigate this well.

K

Kira Dorrian 08:58

I totally agree. And I also agree with what you said that that is an absolute uphill battle, like we are swimming upstream as parents doing that. Which is so unfortunate. It's like, I mean, I could go on all day about wanting to change the culture of our world. But there we are. So how did you do that, Deana? How did, how did you handle this with your kids? Especially, I'm especially curious because that internal monologue for you is, it sounds like something that you struggle with, you know. What were the ways that you went about maybe modeling differently for your kids and talking with them about it and handling their own failures?

D

Deana Thayer 09:38

Yes. So two big things. One is around the vocabulary piece. So I'm going to talk about that first. And that is I started to even see my own children, even in early grade school, letting their internal self talk become external. So I would hear my son; he's erasing an answer on a worksheet until there's a hole in the paper. I mean, we're talking vigorous erasing, saying, oh, you're so stupid. And that was such a red flag for me. Oh, he's already willing to name call himself over a simple homework error. And so this, for me, came down a lot to the word peace. And I care a lot about words, I think they carry power. And so we talked a lot once I heard that, even though we'd been talking in advance about how we speak to ourselves, and of course, in our home with a faith paradigm, also how God sees us, and that that can really help us feel great about ourselves. But we had to have some firm conversations about other ways we could, as I mentioned a moment ago, separate the I made a mistake on my paper versus I'm stupid. You know, even really brilliant people make mistakes, even geniuses make mistakes. We talked a lot, actually, just because this

was a really cogent example about Thomas Edison. And he, I mean, again, I don't love the word. But if you really want to be literal, that guy failed hundreds of times, before he had his success, but we don't remember him for the failures. When people talk about him in a quick sentence, they say he invented the light bulb. They don't say he messed up a million times first. And so what's so interesting to me when we were talking about this was reframing how that looks. And so that was one thing is the separation. So I talked to them a lot about you aren't dumb, you aren't stupid, you got a wrong answer. That's very different than you being somehow unworthy. But the second kind of piece of that is getting this positive idea of narrowing things down. And that worked better for my firstborn type a person. That just resonated better with her than with Marc, but that really helped her to think, okay, I've now figured out what doesn't work. So that was another thing that was really helpful in terms of vocabulary like, Oh, well, that didn't work. Now, I'm going to find what does. So it kind of helps. Now, I've ruled out something. I know not to try that again. That also can help us, I think, be more positive with our words. So that was kind of the word piece. And then in the action piece, interestingly, I actually used the I do it, we do it, you do it framework for this, to practice talking about these things this way. So I would actually hand them a script for this, when they were quite young. And I can remember this as early as first grade, walking through oh, you know, it looks like I made a mistake on my paper, I should find my eraser and take care of that and fix it. But you know what that means? I now know one way not to do it. And I can try something else. A lot of, I can try. A lot of, not yet. Like I haven't learned the right answer to this yet. Instead of, I stink or I must be dumb. So it was a lot of hearing me do it kind of handing them that vocabulary, if that makes sense. And then sometimes we would try it together. So when they were really little, I even would have them repeat after me. So our we do it was more like, you know, I just heard you say that you were dumb. I'd like you to say this instead. And I would hand them the phrase, but then they would repeat it back to me. And eventually, I could overhear them at the kitchen island talking to themselves, oh, I made a mistake. Where's my eraser? Super positive, not a big deal, just a regular part of life. And I think that normalizing piece, like we talk so much about in emotional intelligence plays in here, too. Oh, my goodness, you made a mistake, super normal. I make mistakes all the time. You know, just today, when I was cooking dinner, I put the wrong amount of pasta in the pot or whatever. Just making that so it's such a normal part of life that they also don't make it a bigger deal than it needs to be. Because that's another thing I see sometimes with children in, in the early years. I, you've said it really well here where you say it not in a negative way, but they're narcissistic. They think everything is about them. And I think that can lead to this mountain out of a molehill kind of thing instead of, oh, it's a little mistake, super normal. It's like, I'm the worst. And so the world is terrible. And, and sometimes these things get really blown up. And it could be over something small, like a homework mistake, but that could translate to bigger views about themselves later. And so I think there's also some real important work we have to do as parents to normalize that.

Because that normalizing minimizes it. Not minimizing in terms of it's no big deal, but minimizing it to the level of how big of a deal it actually is, which is this actually happens to everybody and you can move on and try again and find that right answer. Does that...? Am I...? That was a long answer to your question, but those are two things we do.

K

Kira Dorrian 15:00

No, those are, those are wonderful. I love that. And I love the concept of from an early age kind of giving them the word so that it becomes that internal monologue. You're like helping them create that internal monologue. I think that's fabulous. We've done a couple of things. And I want to be honest that one of the current struggles I'm having in my parenting is around this, because I think that Dave and I handle this really well. Like, it's something I'm awfully proud of. And I'm still seeing my kids struggle, and that's hard. And I think that, do you know, the concept of spray and pray? Have you heard this?

D

Deana Thayer 15:38

No, I have not heard this phrase.

K

Kira Dorrian 15:41

It's a great phrase, it's when, when kids do theater, or do TV, it's called spray and pray. So you, like spray their hair, and you pray that they're gonna perform today, you know. And so, I feel like this is one of those topics where it's a little bit of spray and pray for me, because I really trust that we're doing the right thing. And I'm really hopeful that, you know, they're, my kids are eight. So we're, we're far from the finish line here. And I think what I'm seeing is a real battle with what the world is telling them, you know, the TV shows have characters who say, I'm stupid, I'm dumb, their books have it. And I, they're at a point now where I can't control everything they read, I can't control everything that they watch. And so it's tricky, because I know they're getting these counter messages to what they're getting at home. And that's been hard to sort of know that we are doing really good things by them. And seeing them still struggle and and just sort of crossing my fingers and hoping that we're on the right track. But all that is to say that in terms of some of the things that we do, we've done a couple of things. So the first thing is, and I think I've mentioned this on, when we had the swearing episode, we have some banned words in our house, not bad words, just banned words. And those are stupid, and dumb, an idiot. And you kind of talked about this too, right? The internal monologue and the words we use to describe ourselves, and I just don't like those words, like, I don't like them. I don't like them said, as my kids say them to themselves, I don't want them said to other people, like those are yucky words. So we just remind them, like, we don't use that word in our house

to describe ourselves or to describe other people. And a couple of times when I've caught my kids sort of commenting negatively on themselves, I'll also say like, hey, please don't talk to my son that way. Please don't talk to my daughter that way, you know, like, I want them to know, like, you wouldn't let a friend talk to another friend that way. Like, I'm your upstander, I'm going to upstand and say, hey, you don't get to talk to my kid that way, right? Even though they're talking to themselves. So that's kind of the first thing. And then another thing that we've done, you know, I have two kids who are, they're both bright. They're both kind of ahead in terms of where they're at academically. And I think something kind of hard happens when you feel like you've been ahead. So a great example, my son is a really fast runner, and they run a mile every week at their school, or they did and, and he was always the first. And suddenly it was like he was scared to lose that placement. Right? Because he knew what it felt like to be first, right? And it became like, suddenly really scary to not... what if I'm not first next week? And so I think it kind of is the same when you feel like a bright kid and you feel like you're ahead. There's almost this fear of like, what's going to happen if that changes? What's going to happen if I'm not ahead anymore? And so one of my kids in particular feels this, I think more deeply than the other. And so we have said to that kiddo, we said to both of the kids, but we were specifically you know, talking to this one child, we've said, you know, look, it is, it's not important to us, for you to come home with straight A's or a perfect report card. Like, we give you permission to not be perfect, we give you permission to come home with grades that represent you were doing your best. That's what we want to see. And I've shared with the kids as well, like I was a strong student, I was a very strong student. And I almost failed physics and had to get a tutor for precalculus because I was bad at those subjects. I was bad at them. So you know, letting them know and normalizing that like, you are probably not going to be perfect at everything. And if you are, okay, great. But if you're not, we don't expect you to be and so we are not looking for you to show us a perfect report card. We are looking for you to show us that you're doing your best and you're growing and you're learning and that's what matters to us. And that has actually really helped this one particular child kind of take the pressure off of like, okay, I'm not going to disappoint my parents, if there's something in my report card that's not perfect. They're not expecting that from me, as long as they know and see that I've done my best. Does that make sense?

D

Deana Thayer 19:47

Yes, and I absolutely agree. I think the overarching principle that we try to impart is doing your best - your individual best - because for some children, their best is going to be Cs. And for some children, their best is going to be A's. But if they're truly working hard and giving it their best and, and working as a diligent student, and that doesn't result in the 4.0, or whatever, I think that does relieve a lot of pressure. So I'm sure that was really a

relief to hear you say that?

K

Kira Dorrian 20:23

Yeah, I think so. And I think also just the the normalizing of like, there are some kids, right, that are just naturally good at everything. But there's also kids like me, who are good at a lot of things, and really bad at physics. And so the, the room and the permission to actually really struggle with something like, you know what, that's actually super normal, and lots of people who are still bright and capable struggle with stuff, and it's okay to struggle with stuff. And lots of bright and capable kids struggle with everything. So there's all this, you know, there's so much gray in there and just allowing room for the gray. And I think that's what that, that conversation did. And then the other thing that we do a lot, and I've said it kind of already in this episode is the whole concept of the failure doesn't define you, how you respond to it defines you. And that is everything. I mean, we talk about in relationships all the time, like, if you make a mistake with a friend, you hurt someone's feelings, you know, that's going to happen, that doesn't define you. But how you choose to handle it, absolutely 100% defines you. And so it's the same, you know, for looking at schoolwork, or whatever it is that like, hey, failure is going to happen. Like we're all going to just get things wrong, sometimes we're human, we're going to bump into each other, we're going to forget things, we're going to, you know, just not understand something, all these things. We're going to try and not succeed. Totally, totally normal, but how we respond to it is going to really define how we feel about our lives. And also our opportunity to grow. This is the other piece of it, right? That growth mindset is not to be underestimated that when we fail, when we fall down, when we make a mistake, if we can actually go okay, that didn't work. What do I try next? Not only are we going to, you know, protect and care for our sense of self and our self esteem, we're also probably more likely to figure out how to do it right, right? And how to figure out how to grow and be better and learn how to do that thing. So there's so many benefits from leaning into the response, and shying away from the thing itself, you know, going okay, that happened. Great. Now what, what do I do next? Moving forward, instead of sitting in the feelings that come up, and, and I think those feelings are normal. And also much like I talked about in the, you know, when do we push our kids and when do we pull back episode, that idea of fear being in the car. Well guess what? Big feelings, when you mess up, are gonna be in the car, we can't kick them out of the car. We can't be like, oh, no, no, you're not supposed to be in here. Of course, they're gonna be in here. But we're not going to let it drive the car, right? We're also going to recognize that like, okay, you're here, and I have feelings about that, which is, makes sense. That's normal. What do I do about it? What am I going to do about it? And that puts us back in a power place, and feeling in control and on top of our lives in a really great way. And that's what I want for my kids. So we talked about that a lot, too. You know, like this doesn't define you, but what you do about it? That really does.

And what do you want to do? What are some options? What could we try next? You know, and kind of leaning into that.

D

Deana Thayer 23:31

No, I really love that. I think there's a lot of wisdom in coaching your children to focus more on their response to when things don't go the way they were hoping. That really is what shapes them as a person rather than those things that go wrong. And while you were talking, even though I have admitted I'm not a fan of the word failure, I also really did resonate, though with your talking about how, especially if kids are stronger in an area, whether it's academics, or sports, or whatever it is, there's that pressure to maintain that. And we actually just dealt with this in our home, and really had to couple that mindset about failure with the emotional intelligence piece. And the reason is, my daughter had a four point when she started college, and she just got her first A minus. And there was sort of this, I think it was mostly put on by herself, but there was this almost internal pressure to maintain the four point. And for those of you who know or who have ever cared, once you lose a four point you never can get it back. So there is no recovery. I mean, she could get a four point again in another semester, but her cumulative GPA will now never again be a 4.0. And so she had a lot of feelings about that. A lot of big feelings. And so what we had to do and I think this is an important tip for parents too, is to couple talking about the event with the feelings about it. And so what we ended up talking through is, especially in college, and especially when you have a rigorous course of study, she isn't majoring in basket weaving, I mean, speech and theology are two heavy hitting majors. She also has a minor in biblical language, she's on the honors track, it's all this huge stuff, right. And so what we ended up having to put side by side was, it is okay, especially in that scenario, to lose your 4.0. But you know what else is okay? It's okay to be disappointed about that. And I think there has to be a place for that as parents too, acknowledging those feelings of disappointment when something doesn't go the way they were hoping or when they fail. Because if we ignore that piece, and are only coaching about the response to it and moving on, it can cause I think, depending on the personality of the child, but it can cause some to go okay, well, I need to stuff my feelings about it, because I just have to move on, because it's normal and fine. Does that make sense?

K

Kira Dorrian 25:57

Yeah, absolutely. And I love that. I'm so glad you brought it up, because I think that's so true. Like, it's a little bit back to what I was saying about it being in the car, like, of course, those feelings are gonna be there. Like she's totally entitled to feel that way. Right? And we have to honor that for her 100%. And we have to figure out how to move forward. But we don't want to not honor the feelings that come up as we're moving forward. Like we

still have to move forward. But it's okay to feel our feelings on the road. On the road forward.

D

Deana Thayer 26:26

Exactly that.

K

Kira Dorrian 26:27

Yeah, no, I love that. I'm so glad you brought that up. Because I think that's really, really fair. And I think it's the same with, you know, in reverse as well that, like, if you're someone who's struggling, and then you're feeling like you're struggling again, there's feelings about that, too. Right? So I think all of it, it's like, we have to acknowledge that human beings don't like to be wrong. We don't, we don't like to be wrong, we don't like to mess up. We don't like to be feeling like we are less than. And the reality is, we live in a world that tells us that when we mess up, when we're wrong, we are less than. So as parents, we have a really tough job of going, you know, your feelings are coming up, because the world tells you that you're supposed to feel that way. And it's, you know, just conditioned in our human experience to feel that way. And you're allowed to feel that way. But hey, let's not dwell on it. That's not like, it's enormous. It's an enormous, enormous task. And I think that's why I'm in the spray and pray period of going this is, this is a long conversation. It's like the sex talk. It's not one time and not going to fix this, my kiddo isn't going to just be immediately fixed by me saying, hey, don't worry about it, don't come home with a 4.0. Right? That's not going to fix it, or me saying, hey, you know what, we all make mistakes, how you handle it is what defines, you know. I'm gonna have to say that like a zillion times, for it to even come close to landing inside of them, because the world keeps telling them otherwise. So I think the, the message here from both of us is keep talking, keep saying it, keep modeling it, right. How you respond to your kids, quote, unquote, failures is really important. And how you encourage them to think about it is really important. So this is not a ball to drop. This is one to keep up in the air and juggling it.

D

Deana Thayer 28:21

It is. You're gonna feel like a broken record. But if ever there was an area where it's worth being a broken record, this one is definitely one to choose. You are going to be saying that, that same thing over and over and your responses to their mix ups and mistakes are going to shape their responses. So that's so true, I couldn't have said it better, Kira. I do have a quote today.



Kira Dorrian 28:47

Yay. It's a good one. I've heard it. I heard it before we hit record, but it's a good one.



Deana Thayer 28:51

Yes, I did give Kira a sneak peek. And this one is anonymous. But wow, really powerful. Here it is. "Never let success get to your head. Never let failure get to your heart."



Kira Dorrian 29:05

I love it. It's a good one. Well, thanks so much for being with us. today, everyone. We are coming toward the end of season three. How crazy is that, Deana?



Deana Thayer 29:16

I know, hard to believe, but it is almost upon us.



Kira Dorrian 29:20

I know. So we've got I think, three episodes left. Next week we have an amazing lady on the show, Andrea Dahlman, who is a lifestyle coach and nutritionist. And she's going to talk about margin which I brought up just a smidge today. And she's awesome. It's a fabulous episode. So make sure you tune in next week. And as we prepare to kind of wind down the season, don't forget, you can always reach out to us info@futurefocusedparenting.com if you have questions. Please, oh please follow us on social media @futurefocusedparenting. And don't forget that if you need support or want some extra resources, we've got some on our website: futurefocusedparenting.com. Raising Adults is produced by Kira Dorrian and Deana Thayer and recorded partially in my laundry room, partially in Deana's bonus room. Music by Seattle band Hannalee. Thanks for listening.



Future Focused Parenting 30:10

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