



U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

## NRFC Spotlight on Dads

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[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

### The Courage to Fail Dealing with Life's Lessons

Nobody wins 100 percent of the time. That is just a fact of life and part of what makes us human. But no one ever loses 100 percent of the time either. Some of the most successful people in the world—past and present—have experienced failure and learned from it, which helped them be more successful. Our attitude toward failure can have a tremendous impact on our relationships with our children. Through our reaction to failure, they can develop valuable personal skills that can contribute to their future success.

By the time children reach school age, the messages they receive from adults about success and failure are clear: winning is good, losing is bad. Children learn quickly that an “F” grade stands for failure. Not making the team, losing the big game, or not being accepted by the “right” crowd might make children believe that if they fail, *they* are failures. You can show them otherwise.

As fathers, we must accept the idea that *when we fail, the attempt failed...not the person*. Throughout their lives, there will be many times when our children make an attempt at something only to fail, but that does not mean they are failures as people. We can teach our children to handle failures so they are not defeated by them but learn from them. Children who think of themselves as failures might give up and quit trying new things. Fear of failure should not stop your children's creativity or ambition. It should not destroy their dreams.

Explain that failure is one of life's best teachers. They should expect that sometimes they are going to fail. And when they do, they can turn a negative incident into something positive by figuring out what they did wrong and applying what they learned in future situations. After they fail, they must keep going and try again. They cannot let failure stop them.

Talk to your children about successful people who have experienced failures. They probably learned about Abraham Lincoln in school. But they might not know how he faced the death of the woman he planned to marry, several failed businesses, and a number of lost elections before he succeeded at becoming President. Like so many other successful people, Lincoln was not defeated by his failures but moved forward through determination and hard work.

Nobody wants to fail, but failure is just as good a teacher as success. Fathers should help children recognize that failure is a part of life. Failure gets our attention and gives us information about what works. From failure, we learn what not to do the next time. Failure also can push us to seek out help from others. That is where fathers can play a big part.

*Take Time to Be a Dad Today*

Unfortunately, many men who are fathers today grew up feeling like failures because they never were told, “You are loved regardless of your performance.” You have the chance to break that tradition with your own children. Every father has the opportunity to reinforce this message. Incarcerated dads can use phone calls, letters, and visits to encourage their children and confirm their love.

Our children should know that it is OK to fail. Failing to make an “A” in a tough class, earn a role in the play, or get the job does not mean they will lose your love or respect. Teach them that a father’s love is not based on their achievements. You do not take their failure personally. Tell them and show them that your love for them is secure and strong. *Let your children know **today** that you believe in them...no matter what.*

Our children face criticism and the possibility of failure every day. Teenagers are particularly critical of themselves. They often think they do not look good enough, sing well enough, are smart enough, or play sports well enough to be successful. They need to know that you believe in them completely and love them without conditions.

Unlike the sign in the used car lot that reads, “As is – No warranty,” children should understand that they could carry a sign that says, “As is – FULL warranty.” No matter what happens, your love will never change. If they take this message to heart, they will learn from their fathers how to “fail forward” and use difficult experiences to grow.



## Discussion Tool

1. As fathers, we can teach our children how to deal with failures so they are not defeated by them. How can you help your children understand that when they fail, although the attempt failed, they are not failures?
2. Fathers can help their children understand that failure is a normal part of life. Discuss an event or experience in your life where you failed at something but learned a valuable lesson.
3. Describe some ways that you can explain to your children that it is OK to fail.
4. Children need to know that you believe in them and love them, no matter what. How can you make sure your children feel safe coming to you when they fail?
5. Brainstorm ideas for helping children recognize that failure is not who they are. It is one of life's best teachers and can allow them to develop.
6. In what areas of your life are you learning to fail forward? Have you shared these experiences with your children?
7. What failures are hard for you to forgive yourself for? What have you done to try and forgive yourself? Why is it easier to forgive others than to forgive ourselves?

## Take Action:

If you are able to, write a letter to each of your children, letting them know that it is OK to fail. Describe how they can learn from failure and that no matter what, you will always love them!

## Check your local public library for these recommended books, and movies on video or DVD

*Drumline*

*The Last Samurai*

*Liar Liar*

*Evan Almighty*

*The Wit & Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln* by James C. Humes

*Facing Your Giants: A David and Goliath Story for Everyday People* by Max Lucado

*Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success* by John C. Maxwell