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This fall's Q&A column is with New York Times bestselling author and child-development specialist, Dr. Michael Thompson.

- Daisy and Sarah



Q: When our children are struggling socially or academically, what is our job as parents?

A: Our job as parents is always to have empathy for our children's struggles, but not to overreact and not to immediately rescue them. The modern, tuned-in parent often finds it hard to bear the pain of their child's struggles, so he or she moves to make the child's difficulties stop in order to treat their own sense of helplessness. At this risk of offering cut-rate, obvious philosophy, I have to remind parents that life is sometimes painful, all children struggle, and surmounting their struggles makes them stronger. Many times we have to stand there feeling awful while watching as our child comes up with a solution on his or her own.

Q: How do we know when to step in and when to let them figure it out? There are real consequences to things going wrong!

A: Things don't usually go wrong instantly. Yes, if your child is literally walking towards a dangerous cliff, grab him. However, most problems build over time and are solved over time. Let your child grapple, analyze, try some solutions and only if she is stuck should you offer to help. "Can I help you?" is a very good thing to ask a child, almost always better than, "Honey, try this...try this...try that."

Q: What does the school most need from me to support my child's social and academic development?

A: Schools need you to send a child to school with enough sleep so that he or she can learn. Sleep! More sleep! Schools need you to send a child to school with reasonably good manners, some control over their impulses, the ability to focus at an age-appropriate level, and a capacity for empathy. After that, schools need you to be willing to acknowledge that your child isn't likely to be a perfect student or a perfectly behaved person. All

children can learn academically and socially, but not all children are academically driven or socially astute. Academic and social skills take time to develop and development is not linear. It helps if a parent can acknowledge that he or she isn't a perfect parent and can accept that a school is sometimes flawed, and that children are resilient even in the face of errors made by themselves, their peers, and adults around them.

Q: You've spoken with thousands of parents. What is the most common mistake parents make?

A: Parents make the mistake of believing that every little thing they do is important, and that they are in charge of the child's development. They are not. Child development is in charge. There is a beautiful biological and cognitive unfolding going on inside every child. Parents have to trust it. Child development has been escorting children through their childhoods in every society, every culture, every religion and often through some pretty lousy parenting with amazingly good results. Trust your child's development.



Dr. Thompson touches on how difficult it can be to trust human development and stand by while the world is not going so well for our kids. We see them struggle and we want to fix it. Our worries spiral when we think about all that could happen if we don't step in. Another way to look at it, though, is what happens to my child if I do step in, clear the path and smooth the bumps? I may protect them in the short run but, what is lost?

When we clear the pathway, our children miss the opportunity to wobble (see the video below). They miss out on the important struggles that push learning and the interaction with us that builds confidence. They miss out on learning to struggle, learning to feel difficult feelings, and learning to get through a tough academic or social situation...and we miss the opportunity to be their excellent "second chicken" showing them how they should see themselves.

From Dr. Larry Cohen's book, *The Opposite of Worry*, we learn that chicks look to another chick in the room to know how things are going. If two chicks are immobilized, even after being released, the less developed one will look to the other to see when it is OK to get up. If you immobilize a chick in front of a mirror, after its release, it will stay down much longer, seeing its reflection as the second chicken messaging "things are not OK and you'd better not get up!"

As parents and second chickens, our reaction to the challenges our children face message to them whether or not they can manage. If we regularly clear their path, fight their fights, or go overboard in emphasizing their "terrible situation" we telegraph that we do not believe in their ability to think through difficult situations and find their way out. As a result, their confidence suffers and "I can't do it" can become their self-messaging.

In both academic and social settings, our children will find themselves in the Learning Pit (Nottingham, 2017). Academically, the pit may include feeling lost, frustrated, and confused. Socially, the pit usually provides an added dose of rejection, especially difficult for a parent to observe. When our kids are in the pit, it's the pits for us, too! Nottingham and Dr. Thompson remind us that these times in the pit are when we need to provide encouragement that they will find their way out rather than a solution or sparkling rescue ladder. If we want

academic and social learning to occur, we have to let them wobble. We should encourage, listen, and support but we cannot rescue them from the pit or they lose out on learning.

Our understanding of neuroplasticity and emotional regulation skill-building, backs this up. It takes multiple trips through multiple learning pits to develop the neural pathways that become habits of mind, go-to thoughts, and self-beliefs. It takes trial and error to develop strategies, learn to manage big emotions, and respond effectively to challenge. Children who have the path cleared and adults fixing everything are robbed of the chance to develop these neural pathways and build confidence in their abilities.

"What about stress, though? My child is soooo stressed!!" There are two ways to look at this -- reflect back on Dr. Thompson's reminder that "Things don't usually go wrong instantly" and know that there is time to observe, gather data, and have conversations with your child to ascertain where their stress is on the continuum between eustress and distress. Often, our children need help identifying if this is a challenge (eustress) or a problem (distress) and a well-placed strategy conversation with you or another trusted adult acting as the supportive second chicken will help them see how to manage the situation and get further help if needed.

Our children need to be seen and heard. They need to know we are listening with care. They also need to know that we are going to encourage them and that we believe in their competence even when they wobble.