

Why you actually don't need to let your kids fail (and everyone should get a medal)

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As parents, many of us choose to spend our five minutes of free time drinking in the latest theories on child-rearing. Depending on the day, it's about fostering grit and remembering not to over-praise, or fretting over the endless flow of trophies our kids bring home just for showing up.

But in his new book, education and parenting author Alfie Kohn says underlying much of the reigning wisdom around parenting is a conservative – even punitive – view of children. Kohn proposes we think a little harder about adopting every new gospel about child-rearing. We might not like the ugly right-wing parent we're accidentally becoming.

We spoke to Kohn about *The Myth of the Spoiled Child: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom About Children and Parenting* from his home in Boston.

There is a never-ending flow of theories on parenting. It's exhausting. But clearly you hit a boiling point and felt like you had to write this book.

What put me over the edge was the fact that beliefs about children and parenting that are not only unsupported but deeply conservative in their ideology are uncritically endorsed even by people who are more liberal on other political issues.

It's a rage that you find expressed when we give a trinket to the kids on the losing team. When people claim that kids feel too good about themselves when they haven't earned that right. Any time people try to step in to alleviate children's pain or try to soften the ugly blow of competition, there is a huge push back from people who think that kids have it too easy. And that the best way to prepare children for the unpleasantness of life is to make them as unhappy as possible when they're young.

Isn't that just the old farts?

You find the same sensibility among people who would never vote conservative, who take the enlightened line on global warming and multicultural activities and so on but nevertheless blast teachers or parents for being too permissive or for being helicopter parents. Who make wild unsupported statements about Millennials who are entitled and have been coddled their whole lives.

Some of these ideas are ubiquitous, like the notion that we don't let kids fail enough.

The two assumptions that are made these days are, one, that kids don't experience enough failure and frustration, which suggests to me a lack of understanding of children's inner lives if people really think that's true, and two, that more failure is good because kids will pick themselves up and try harder next time. The reality is, according to decades of psychological research is what conduces to success is past success.

So letting a kid fail on a test doesn't teach him or her to study harder next time?

Anyone who hangs around real kids knows that the more likely outcomes are that kids come to think of school as something they're not good at. Or to lead them to resent the teacher. Or to cheat if they're under a lot of pressure to perform well. And with some good reason, to doubt the validity of tests.

If you look below the superficial results, you've got a lot of miserable kids studying very hard who are hating learning and not feeling great about themselves.

Is there a middle ground?

Parents need to think about how best to support their kids. To ask questions like, how do I help my kid keep his excitement about figuring stuff out? How do we revive that sense of curiosity and support depth of thinking?

In a related matter, what about those trinkets for the losing team?

Giving a recognition trinket to the losing side is a tiny step in the direction of minimizing the inherent harms of unnecessary competition. People are somehow criticizing this as trying to persuade the losing team that they didn't really lose, as if kids didn't know the difference. There's this mindless macho sensibility that we must do nothing to moderate the ugly effects of competition. Otherwise children won't be prepared for "real life."

In the book you say the notion of spoiled kids in general t'was ever thus.

People claim that kids are indulged and that parents are spoiling their kids and failing to set limits – unlike the good old days. And then you go back a couple of decades and find that people were saying exactly the same thing and you go back another couple of decades and you find the same thing again.

What about the kid in the New Yorker piece [Spoiled Rotten](#) who demands his father tie his shoes.

We can always come across ridiculous examples of parents who do silly things. But we have an obligation to look past individual anecdotes and not over-generalize. Are there kids who run wild in public places and make a nuisance of themselves while their parents ignore them? Sure. But for every example like that there are hundreds of examples of kids who are bullied, bribed, yelled at or threatened by parents whose only apparent objective is to get mindless compliance.

You take on Jean Twenge, the researcher behind the Millennials-are-narcissists trope and author of *Generation Me*.

Younger people tend to score higher on narcissism measures than older people; that's always been true. When older people look at young people and see what they think is narcissistic behaviour, they

incorrectly attribute this to a change over generations. In reality it's a developmental change. Jean Twenge has become this one-woman crusade to see young people in the worst possible light and claim to have data to support it. But when experts in data analysis review her studies carefully or try to replicate those studies they come up empty-handed.

Maybe parenting - and parenting media - involves some sort of amnesia?

We often forget the way things were for us. Baby boomers were accused of being shiftless hippies by their parents and turned around and accused Generation X of being slackers. Now, we both unite and accuse Millennials of very similar things. Some of it may just be amnesia. Some of it may take on a more ominous cast which is that we tend to reproduce some of the disturbing things that were done to us by our parents when we have children of our own, as if to erase any possibility that our parents didn't do what was best for us. That was psychoanalyst Alice Miller's hypothesis – that we're desperate at an unconscious level to believe that our parents did what was in our best interest. So to avoid having to confront that, we just do it to our kids.

This interview has been condensed and edited