Re-Framing Failures

Recently, I posted my top 10 tips for parenting success. Now, I am elaborating on each item on the list. Parenting Tip #9 is this:

Re-frame failures to be also blessings in disguise.

Thomas Edison, the famous inventor, is most famous for failing. What?? Yep, that’s right. When interviewed about inventing the incandescent light bulb, he revealed that he tried nearly 1000 elements and materials to find one that would maintain the light in a light bulb. After 999 failures, he found tungsten on his 1000th try. When asked about his persistence, Edison responded that each failure moved him closer to success. Now, that’s a blessing in disguise.

Closer to home, I attended Wake Forest University as an undergraduate. In most schools, students have to declare a major by the Spring semester of their second year. My dad was an accountant, so I thought I might have some accountant genes in me. I took Introduction to Accounting and Introduction to Economics during my Fall semester. I also found psychology to be interesting. So I took Introduction to Psychology as well. Well, I got a D in accounting, a D in economics, and an A in psychology. And who’s the psychologist now? While I hated getting bad grades, the blessing of those D’s was that they helped me figure out what I didn’t want to do and pointed me toward my chosen career.

Three-year old Bella filled a glass almost up to the rim and began carrying it from the kitchen sink to the breakfast table. She was careful, walking slowly and trying to keep it from spilling. Her mom was eating a doughnut at the table. She stopped mid-bite, glanced at her daughter, and instinctively held her breath.

“Oooh, baby,” she cautioned. “That’s a full glass of orange juice. Careful.”

Just then, Bella sloshed some juice out of the tumbler before making it to the table.

Many parents would have jumped into action, anticipating the spill and preventing it. That might have led to shaming, discipline, and definitely a lost teachable moment.

Bella was simply trying out being a big girl. She wanted to find out if she could carry her own juice to the table. She might have even thought that she was helping mama out. She failed in her efforts.

Rather than focus on the failure, turn it into a blessing in disguise. After the spill, mama could have said, “It’s okay, sweetie. It’s just a spill. But look at you, trying to be a big girl. Nice try. Now, go get the paper towels and help me clean this spill up.”

After tidying, mama could have asked, “Bella, what do you think you might have done differently to get your juice to the table without spilling it?” This might prompt an obvious answer, but mama is helping her daughter problem solve, rather than just giving her the answer.

Certainly life threatening circumstances with our children need to be anticipated and stopped with firm direction. Think, “Joey, stop. Look both ways for cars before getting your ball out of the road.”

However, if you monitor your child’s actions so that all she does is succeed, you will stay overwhelmed and she will never learn from her failures. Knowing what’s not working is as or more important than finding out what works. When you reframe failures to be also blessings in disguise, you are promoting your child’s independence and responsibility. Teachable moments abound.