

# Permission to Fail...and Succeed

From the [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com) E-Newsletter by Kathie Snow

When my son, Benjamin, was in a general education kindergarten class, the teacher, Mrs. S, was uncomfortable having a child with a disability in her class. Despite lots of support from me, and the special education staff, she seemed content to let Benjamin “be” in her class, so long as she didn’t have to exert any effort to help him learn. Which, of course, is exactly what happened: he wasn’t learning, even though I knew he could.

During an informal meeting with Mrs. S and the supportive principal, I told her, “I know my son can learn, and I know you can teach him, but you have to be willing to try new things. I trust you enough to put my son in your care every day. You have to trust me enough to know that you can call me and say, ‘Today was a disaster—nothing worked!’ Then you and I can figure it out together. My husband and I need to do this all the time. But if you don’t give my son the opportunity to learn—by trying new things to see what works—he won’t learn!”

Things got better after that. She was willing to try: she took risks and learned from mistakes, and that enabled her to teach my son. The principal later said to me, “You gave Mrs. S ‘permission to fail,’ and everyone needs that. Before, she was unwilling to try things because she was afraid of failing; you let her know you didn’t expect her to be perfect, and that enabled her to get out of her comfort zone and feel more confident about trying new things.”

Being allowed to make decisions, take risks, and try new things, and then learn valuable lessons from our mistakes is regarded as an important element in human growth and development, except in the disability arena. There, children and adults with disabilities are “protected”—and prevented from making their own decisions or taking any risks—so they remain helpless and dependent on others. (Do

we ever take responsibility for the consequences of our actions in creating this situation?)

Similarly, persons with influence (family members, educators, service providers, etc.) may also be unwilling to take risks on behalf of a person with a disability for a variety of reasons. Like Mrs. S, a teacher may be unwilling to do things that are out of her comfort zone. A mother may be unwilling to allow her child to be in a general ed classroom, participate in community activities, etc., because she’s fearful for her child’s safety, or she may even feel embarrassed by or ashamed of her child—*she’s* comfortable only when her child is with “others like him” in segregated environments.

How can we overcome our resistance to risk-taking and give ourselves Permission to Fail? One way is to ask, “What’s the worst thing that can happen if [fill in the blank]?” Examining the potential worst-case scenarios can shore up our courage when we realize those scenarios are usually *not really* that risky after all. We can also ask,

“What’s the *best* thing that can happen if [fill in the blank]?” Ahhh, envisioning positive outcomes can be highly motivating (and self-fulfilling)!

What will it take to give children and adults Permission to Fail? Let’s remember *who* this is really about: do we dare allow our own fear or discomfort to impose limitations on another? And don’t persons with influence have a *responsibility* to ensure that children and adults with disabilities have opportunities to be self-directed: to experience the dignity of risk, own their triumphs and tribulations, and benefit from the lessons learned? If we deny a person Permission to Fail, aren’t we also denying Permission to Succeed?

Winston Churchill said, “Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm.” Give yourself *and* people with disabilities Permission to Fail and you’ll also be sowing seeds for success!

**I’ve missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.**

*Michael Jordan*