

# Create Resilient Kids Through Failure

Jessica Lahey, Teacher, Writer, Mom and  
Author of the Book, Gift of Failure

Reaching Roots Podcast, E14

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## [Description]

Overparenting has the potential to ruin a child's confidence and undermine their education. Parents who rush to school to deliver forgotten assignments, challenge teachers on report cards, interfere in children's friendships and on the playing field, might be depriving their kids of important life skills.

In this episode Jessica Lahey talks about how parents can step back from their instincts and embrace their children's failure. She provides advice for handling everyday school & social situations and how, by letting our children fail, we can set them up to succeed.

## [Intro]

**Bio:** Jessica Lahey is a teacher, writer, and mom. Over twenty years, she's taught every grade from sixth to twelfth in both public and private schools. She writes about education, parenting, and child welfare for *The Atlantic*, Vermont Public Radio, *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling book, *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*.

Jessica says, modern parenting is defined by an unprecedented level of overprotectiveness: parents who rush to school at the whim of a phone call to deliver forgotten assignments, who challenge teachers on report card disappointments, mastermind children's friendships, and interfere on the playing field. Though these parents see themselves as being highly responsive to their children's well-being, they aren't allowing their children to experience disappointment and frustration. They prevent children from the opportunity to fail, so they can learn to solve their own problems.

Every parent wants their children to be happy and wants to instinctually protect them from the world of struggle. However, some parents take “being supportive” to another level, are hyper-involved and hover over their children — this can also be described by the term “helicopter parenting”. Such parent behaviour deprives your children of the feeling of independence and thinking for oneself.

Overparenting has the potential to ruin a child’s confidence and undermine their education, since it makes them doubt their own abilities when they don’t get the chance to figure things out on their own.

Preventing our kids from falling and getting hurt to intervening in their disagreements with peers, friends and co-workers – this parent behaviour is present from when our kids are toddlers to even when they attend college. The world we live in, at times can be harsh and cruel. We need to create children that can grow up to be successful, resilient, and self-reliant adults.

In this episode Jessica Lahey talks about how parents can step back from their instincts and embrace their children’s failure. She provides advice for handling everyday situations from schoolwork to social dynamics and how, by letting our children fail, we’re actually setting them up to succeed.

Jessica is a member of the Amazon Studios Thought Leader Board and wrote the educational curriculum for Amazon Kids’ *The Stinky and Dirty Show*. She earned a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts and a J.D. in law from the University of North Carolina.

She lives in Vermont with her husband and two sons and her second book, *The Addiction Inoculation: Raising Healthy Kids in a Culture of Dependence*, is set to be released in April.

[Episode]

**JAISON DOLVANE:** All right. Welcome, Jessica.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Thank you so much for having me.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** It's great to have you here. So Jessica, tell us about you know, what motivated you to write gift of failure and just give us a little background on your story.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** So I as you mentioned in your intro have been a teacher for, I was a teacher for a really long time for about 20 years and found myself suddenly in middle school. I didn't think I would be a middle school teacher ever in a million years. I was applying for high school teaching job and cause that's where I was most comfortable, I thought, and the person who was trying to hire me, so just come meet them. And I did, and I fell so in love with them, like it was just, it was so instant, and I was so positive. I withdrew my application for the high school job immediately. And I went for the middle school job and I just, I'm so glad I did that because, I don't know that the book, the gift of failure would have turned into the same sort of thing. If it was about really, really little kids or older kids, the heart of the book, you know, the book is about, you know, preschool all the way through college, but the heart of the book is really in middle school. And I've really loved teaching that grade.

So when they're that, those years and when I was there, what was happening was more and more often I was seeing these incredible learning opportunities fall into my lap because kids that's the magic of teaching middle school is that they're just screwing up all over the place and we get to sort of just, you know, we get to sort of be there and watch them and then wait for the learning opportunities. Cause anyone who's spent any time around kids knows, you can't just sort of do it on your schedule. You got to sort of wait until they're ready. And often those learning opportunities would get taken away either because the parents would rescue the kid from something, or the parents would take the consequences away. And it was just frustrating. And I got into this very bad place where I was really resentful of some of the parents of my students, which any educator knows that's a really bad place to be. Outcomes for learning are just better when there's a really good homeschool relationship.

So, and I was really interested in how that was affecting the kids motivation, how it was affecting the kids engagement and how that was affecting their learning in the end. That's my main goal is the learning. And so I dove into the research on motivation, on engagement, on all these different things to sort of get at how, the way we parent, the way we teach, the way we coach ends up affecting learning. Because that was, that was really for me in the end that's what has to happen in my world.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Now, what specifically was kind of causing you to be resentful of the parents? Was it basically just kind of their involvement in in everyday sort of schooling?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** You know, it, there were, you know, of course there were like these flashpoint moments. I talk about a couple in the gift of failure. There was a moment that I specifically remember, I called a parent to give some feedback about how that there, the fact that their kid was having a really hard time hearing negative feedback, any kind of criticism, put him in such a tailspin that he would, he would dissociate, he would just sort of go blank right in front of me. And so his learning when it came to his writing specifically just came to a standstill. And so I was writing with, you know, my intention was to say, let's sit down and talk about ways to help him hear feedback that isn't, you know, you're so great. You're so wonderful. I didn't say it that way, of course.

And what I expected was to get a phone call back maybe, and instead what happened was the parent came to the school, pulled her kid out of lunch in front of all of his friends, angrily and berated him in the car. And he came back to my class after lunch, just unable to function, just he had been sobbing. He was just, you know, and the way learning works is the minute you, if you would like to interrupt, learning, just, you know, introduce stress into the brain. And this kid was just non-functional for the rest of the day. And in that moment, I was feeling actually protective of this kid with his parents. And again, these are, we should be working together, and our goal should be the learning. Our goal should not be you know, what's going to threaten the A or, you know, don't make me look bad, that kind of thing, or you're not fulfilling this my idea of who you should be. And I was worried, I was frankly just really worried about my students.

And then as these that my life has gone along and since gift of failure came out, I spent five years working in an inpatient drug and alcohol rehab for kids and their relevance and engagement and learning becomes even more important because it's not, it really isn't about the grades. It's about getting them through rehab and helping them stay sober and helping them find something in themselves that they feel is worth saving. And a lot of those kids came into my classroom feeling like they had been lost, forgotten, they were stupid. They'd been told they were stupid, they'd been told they were in a dead-end situation. And so my job became more about helping kids find self-efficacy and motivation and something to hope for as opposed to just, you know, arguing about the difference between an 89 and a 91.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah, of course, of course. So was there, you know, was this kind of a process that, you know, you, you experienced various different sort of situations, and then eventually you kind of decided to do gift of failure or was there some particular experience that kind of tipped it?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** I talk about it specifically in gift of failure. There had been an experience with one of my students where she wrote her graduation speech essentially about the fact that she was so paralyzed by not being perfect by being perceived as not perfect, that it was, she didn't care about learning anymore. She just, everything in her life was so focused on that, those numbers, the difference between 89 and 91. And that was her whole world and the problem and what happened right after that, there was a, it was a really nice sequence of events where right after that, I had been blogging as a teacher, but I hadn't really published anywhere on the national stage. And right after that, a study came out of Australia, looking at the way various parenting styles affect learning and achievement and motivation, mostly motivation.

And so I was able to not criticize the parents of my students, but use the examples that guidance counselors and, or sorry, school counselors and teachers had provided in that Australian study. And they were, you know, it's the same stories over and over again, so much so that one of the administrators at my school came up to me and she's like, seriously, are these are parents that you're, you disguise them, but they are parents you're talking about, right? And I said, absolutely not. They're from this study. And I sold that piece to the Atlantic. It was my first piece ever that I sold to the Atlantic. And that went completely crazy viral. And that led to a big auction for the rights for the sale of my book, which, you know, fortunately it was a fantastic experience for me.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Great. Congratulations. I think what that probably tells us is that, you know, what you wrote was people actually resonated with that, not just in Australia, but everywhere.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Well, I think, you know, education parenting, it's all a series of ups and downs and pendulums going back and forth to mix metaphors. So we tend to swing wildly in one direction, and then we have a bit of a course correction and we go back, you know, so I'm hoping, you know, as a teacher, I really do think that we're headed in a good direction. I think that we're learning lessons from this pandemic that will extend out into the future, I hope. I think we're learning lessons about assessment. Yesterday I got an email from a school saying essentially that

they have decided that if a student would like to opt to do something to take their grades pass, fail understanding, and they gave them this long paragraph about, you know, understanding what this will mean on college transcript or, you know, on your transcript to apply to colleges. But that even retrospectively, if you want to go, like, let's say you get to the end of the class, and you're just haven't done well. You can retrospectively go back and decide to pass, fail that course.

And I think that takes, that is number one brave of the school. Number two shows me that what the school is really worried about are the kids. And number three, I happen to also know this school doesn't give letter grades. It gives standards-based assessments. And that right there means that the school is more interested in mastery and learning than in, you know, a letter or a number next to the kid's grades. So, there are a lot of things that I think we'll be taking out of this that are positive. And from a parenting perspective, there have been some really interesting moments realizing how much sleep our kids really needed. And weren't getting, realizing that over-scheduling, our kids was really toxic and bad for them. And now that they can't go do sports and cello and traveling soccer league, you know, in some ways there have been some positive from that.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah, no, that's great. So let's go back to I mean, this is all very interesting. Let's go back to just the problem, right? So you know, obviously the title of the book is gift of failure. I mean, what is the problem? I talk a little bit about it in the intro, but would be really good know it.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** So there's sort of two parallel themes running through the book. One is that we tend to use a lot of what are called extrinsic motivators with kids, money for grades, grades, points, scores, trophies, honor roll. Those are sort of the things we perceive as positive. And then the negative ones, like, you know, you're grounded, if you don't keep a B or better, or you know, if you don't get an A in this class, I'm taking away your phone six months from now, when we get the grades, or I'm going to watch you on your phone, I'm going to surveil you on your phone. So I know where you are all the time, or I'm going to log onto the school portal and check your grades 10 times a day, so that I know exactly what's going on. All of those things are extrinsic controls that we attempt to place on kids. And the research is really clear. There's, you know, 50 years of really good research on this, that, that doesn't work to keep kids interested in something for the long, to keep people humans interested in doing something over the long-term. So there's that problem with the extrinsic motivators right there. And, you know, I'm a big problem there because I was giving grades for a very long period of time and points, bonus points. You should see how high kids will jump for like an extra

credit point. It's amazing. So there's the motivation part. And then there's also what different kinds of parenting do to learning. And it turns out that highly directive parents, parents who tell kids what to do and when to do it, in what order to do it, and then what color ink to do it. And here just let me do it for you.

Those kinds of really directive parents actually undermine kids' ability to learn. Kids who have directive parents when given challenging tasks are less likely to complete those tasks when the parents are not around than kids who have what we call autonomy supportive parents, parents who give the kids some support, redirect them, but let the kids figure things out and let them have some control over how and where and why, and when they do things. So if you imagine, you know, the kid, I have two kids coming to my classroom door with the same sort of horsepower from a cognitive perspective, I'd much rather have the kid with the autonomy supportive parents, because some of the most important teaching tools in my toolkit require me to give kids things that are a little bit frustrating for them, a little past their ability level to stretch them. These things called desirable difficulties. Really powerful teaching tools. And if the ones who have the directive, parents are going to be less likely to be able to complete those tasks. Then those kids will learn less in my classroom. So, you know, we're trying to pave the way for our kids, snowplow, whatever you want to call it, push it all out of the way for the kids. And in the end, we're actually undermining their capacity to learn. And that's before you get into all the Carol Dweck stuff, the fixed and growth stuff from Carol Dweck.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. Yeah. I guess, you know, you're saying these are kind of like the basics that we need to sort of be able to instill into our kids. So how do parents do that? I mean, you know, we as parents are instinctually focused on making sure that our kids sort of just get it done or [12:11 inaudible] we sort of look at it and say, well, if they got that done, then that's going to be success. What's your advice to parents? I mean, how should they be stepping back and how should they be just getting themselves into a mode where they're allowing kids to figure out themselves as opposed to avoiding jumping in.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** So envision the best teacher you ever had in school or as a coach or as a mentor of some kind. And remember, if you can, how that teacher taught you, I'm assuming they probably didn't hand you all the answers. I'm assuming that they gave you challenges. They were supportive. They were there for you when you raised your hand said, you didn't understand, there's this weird thing that happens in a lot of teacher's heads in my head this happened to me where I had this divide. Like I had the teacher side of my brain and I had the parents side of my brain. And I wasn't using some really powerful stuff that I was

doing, like with my advisees at school, like helping them with goal setting and focusing more on the process and less on the end product and all that stuff.

So bringing some of those really important teaching tools home in a way that didn't feel like I was the kids, you know, Knights teacher was really effective. And a lot of that came down to, again, focusing more on the process and less on the product. So when your kid comes home with a grade, that's either really desirable or really undesirable, you know, treat it in a similar fashion in which you can say something like, you know, Oh, interesting grades. So what did you do to get that grade? What are you going to do differently next time to avoid the same outcome? Or what are you going to replicate? Did you get enough sleep last night? Did you cram the night before, or have you been using flashcards periodically to start, really build your knowledge base? What are you going to keep and what are you going to get rid of as a result of this process so that you can change it for next time? Because this has happened. What I care about is that you learned. We had, I mean, to be perfectly Frank, we are right in the middle of a really tense day in our house because something went wrong. One of the children did not do something that they were supposed to do. And I was so angry. I couldn't see straight, and I had to stop and think, okay, this has happened now, this could be a really pivotal moment.

I talk in the book about a kid who was about to fail out of school and his mother. And I came up with kind of a creative solution and that solution where he had to sort of really take control of his education on a probationary, they let him stay at school on a probationary basis. He points to that and says, that was the turning point for me.

That's when I fully understood that this is my life and not my parents' life. And so this thing that happened today has the potential to be an incredible learning opportunity, but not if it's all about berating. If I just fix it for him, if I go out and smooth out all those consequences, no matter how much I want to do that. Cause this is kind of a high stakes thing. I'm not going to do that. And we had a conversation about, you know, can this be a big turning point for you? And he said, yeah, I think that's what this is.

I get it. So I think those PR emphasis on process over product and thinking more, long-term like my kid's going to have to do other things that require this kind of planning in the future. And if I fix this one right now that next one is not going to be any different and I have to be planning ahead for the next one. I've got to help him know what went wrong, how to change it, what to do next time. And I'm here

to support him as long as he's learning, but if he's not learning, then things are going to rain down.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** So much, it's easier said than done right. In that moment of emotion on both sides. And somehow, you know saner thoughts need to prevail and you need to be able to sort of have that conversation and put yourself in that situation.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Well, and the stakes get higher and higher and higher. I mean, the, you know, my kids are now older, and I have a college kid and a high school kid. And, you know, a couple of years ago, the college kids screwed something up big time and decided, made a very conscious decision, not to tell me about it and decided to tackle it on his own. Because two weeks later when he came to me and said, by the way, I kept something from you and I have to come clean, but here's how I fixed it. The look on his face, it was like, that was everything to me. I mean, you know, at the time, you know, if I look at how I would've dealt with it at the time, I would have been really freaked out. I would have gotten on the phone. I would have gotten online and researched all kinds of things. And he was so proud of himself for doing it himself and for figuring it out himself. And I just, that's like highlight, a parenting, If I had a highlight reel from my parenting, it would be this thing that I was not even allowed to deal with because my kid really wanted to prove that he could do it himself.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** He had a positive fix for it.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** He did have it, it required a lot of work. I'm allowed to tell the story now, but he was, he had a summer job, and he was going to be running the archery program and he had to have a certificate and they don't just teach archery certificate, a teacher's certificate stuff everywhere, and he got the days wrong and he showed up halfway through it and wasn't going to get his certificate of completion. So there's the whole job. So he had to go to a whole other state on a different date to take the class again, paid for it with his own money, all that sort of stuff. And he fixed it and he could keep a summer job. So, yeah. And I think he was like set 18, 17 or 18 at the time. Something like that.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Oh, that's great. So Jessica, is this all about school? Or does it sort of expand beyond that? And you know, one of the things that I think about a lot is you know, I've got three kids, 13, 11, and 7, and, you know, certainly associate with parents in those age groups over the years. And one of the things that I feel, you know, really

stresses parents out is when there's any kind of conflict between their kids in the school yard or anywhere else. So what are your thoughts about like, you know, how should they be dealing with that? You know, cause obviously what maybe feels like not the right approach is kind of like, you know, zooming in there and that with the kid or removing the kid from the situation completely, maybe it is the right thing, I guess depends on the situation, but we'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Yeah. So this is not at all just about grades. The book is, you know, there's a whole thing in there about household duties. There's a whole thing in there about, you know, sort of social skills and peers and things like that. And one of the things we're seeing is a resurgence of, you know, social, emotional learning programs in schools, because a lot of kids are, we have not had to deal with sort of the immediate consequences of those sort of playground squabbles, because we tend to remove them from each other right away, you know, one kid in the sandbox throw sand at the other kid. And then we take them apart because that's what responsible parents do, right? And then we force them to apologize to each other, you know, without any right. So in a totally empty, so we remove them from each other. So they can't look at each other's eyes and see the consequences of their actions. You know, the kid who threw the sand, doesn't get to understand that he hurt the feelings of the person who got the sand in the face and the person who got the sand in the face doesn't get to stand up for themselves and self-advocate. So we've removed that. And then we wonder why the kid who threw the sand in the face turns into a kid in seventh grade who doesn't understand social signals and seeks attention through negative behaviors and that, and the kid who, you know, the other kid doesn't learn to self-advocate maybe. And that's where things really start with really young kids.

And of course there are moments when we have to step in because someone's going to get hurt or whatever, but I will also point to, so in New Zealand and Australia, they've done some really cool research on taking rules away and supervision away. And that sort of hovering thing during, for example, recess.

Now, you have to understand then Australia and New Zealand people can't sue schools. They have a litigation shield against schools for various things. So this is a place where you, that there is a place where you can do these sort of studies. But in this one study, I wrote about for the Atlantic, they sort of took the rules away at playground, and on the playground and they saw an increase in the behavior went and got better. The bullying went down, the kids got more exercise. There was sort of all these things that point to, you know, the micromanaging is hurting as well.

As, you know, we may prevent a few broken arms. We may prevent a few stubbed toes, but it's also really messing up social dynamics. And when we step into too quickly and the stories that teachers have told me of the lengths that they've been asked to go to, when they're trying to protect one kid who is experiencing sort of normal social jostling, I'm not talking about, full-out dangerous bullying, I'm talking about normal social jostling are just, it's unbelievable where, you know, teachers following kids around to watch them and try to overhear what they say all the time. It's unfortunate that some kids are not being given the opportunity to learn through their experiences, how to react to those things.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. You know what strikes me as obviously, you know, for adults, it's difficult to deal with conflict. A lot of people don't like to deal with conflict.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** I hate it.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** A lot of us do, right? So, so I feel like you know, in essence, as a parent, you sort of feel like it's our job to equip our kids with the tools to be able to deal with conflict. And if you can't yourself figure these things out in these easy way, you know, solution is take them out and, you know, figure it out as you go from it. So, I mean, are there tools that we can give our kids to sort of better equip them to self-advocate?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Absolutely. And that's why I'm, so, you know, when I do stuff like this, I have to talk in broad sweeping strokes about the researcher behind things, but, you know, in *Gifted Failure* and in another book that I love my friend, Julie Lythcott-Haims has a new book or has a book out called *How to Raise an Adult*. And she actually has a new book coming out in April that's sort of the kid's version. It's this book called, *Your Turn How to Be an Adult*. It'll be out on April 6th, the same day my new book comes out. But this is like a Bible for young adults and older teens on like the Bible of adulting. And she covers everybody in here. She covers neuro atypical kids. She talks about kids from all different kinds of backgrounds about the tools they need in order to be adults. And so it's very easy. So both Julie and I create like these scripts essentially like, okay, kid says this, you say that, or teacher says this, you say that. And conflict resolution is a really important part of learning how to self-advocate and both of us talk about it in our books and both of us talk about it a lot in our speaking.

The other thing that's been really interesting, speaking of conflict is I get the coolest emails from parents saying, you know, I get videos, parents showing me like what they didn't think their little kids could do and check it out I have one of, this little boy who wanted to help with the laundry and it's a top loading machine and he couldn't reach the top. So he got a chair, and his dad was right there. So it was all safe. But he turned to his little sister who was like a toddler. And he said, okay, if I fall in, whatever her name was you've to grab my legs and pull me back out. So this kid was pulling headfirst in the washing machine, pulling wet laundry out, handing it to his toddler sister who would then put it in the washing machine. And then at the end, he kind of pretended he couldn't get out so that his little sister could help him. And she grabbed onto his legs and pulled down. So I get those kinds of videos about, I gave my kids more autonomy and Oh my gosh, look at what they can do. But the ones that I love the most are the ones where they say, I gave my kids more autonomy. I stopped nagging as much, and our relationship has transformed.

So if you hate conflict, try taking nagging out of the equation. I mean, it just, you know, and it was sort of like the thing I talked about this morning where, you know, we had this huge thing, and I was living beyond belief this morning. And I was like, there are two ways I can go here. I can get angry and completely shut this conversation down and we can learn nothing from it. Or we can have a constructive conversation about how to do better next time and not get emotional. Cause he, you know, kids when they know they've screwed up, they're already emotional. So us adding our fuel to that fire does not help. So conflict resolution is super important, and you'll be seeing more on that for me. I hope I'm working on something right now. Specifically on conflict resolution and kids.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Oh, that'd be excellent. So I want to go back to, we talked a little bit about bullying, right? And we talked about this kind of fine line, what I feel as a fine line. Or maybe it's not in that, you know, parents can feel like there's conflict, but they can also feel like that's bullying. And you know, I do feel like in some cases, parents may misjudge, probably bias more towards their kids are bullying only because it tends to be used so much more nowadays in sort of our language.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** And there's legal precedent for the fact that in various States, it's not only is it not defined in certain States, it's defined by whatever the parent or the school says it is, or the minute someone uses that word, then suddenly that's what it is. It's very confusing. It's very, very confusing.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** So we're hypersensitive about this entire time. So do you have any thoughts in terms of how parents should, is there a different lens to be looking at this that can help them just better understand the situation?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** I think one of the places we can start is by looking at the purpose of relationships in kids' lives you know, when they're really young, it tends to be a proximity. You know, like I have a friend and there, our kids happen to be the same age, so yay. You're friends because we want to get together and talk. And then it changes as they get into later in elementary school and into middle school, it's less about proximity and more about finding things in people that you either want to emulate or try out. And so middle school friendships are actually quite transitory. If you look at the numbers, there's some wonderful research. If you look at the numbers on how many middle school friendships tend to persist, it's a really low number. So what is really fun also from my perspective, it's not as fun when you're in the middle of it is a lot of those relationships are about trying things that maybe aren't you as a kid, but you want, you know, that girl over there she's mean, what does it feel like to be mean? That boy over there is a little rebellious. What does it feel like to be rebellious? And that's where we come in is, we have to role model good relationships for our kids. And that requires us to have conversations about our relationships as well.

You know saying things to a kid like, you know, when you come home with so-and-so's house, you seem really tense and off. Is there, what is it about your relationship with her that you find rewarding? What is it, what feeds you about that relationship? And that sort of requires us to do the same thing about our relationships and, you know, through in middle-age now it's much easier for me to say, you know, my relationships now are because they, it feeds me, the relationship feeds me, my friends make me a better person and people that, yeah and so modeling that and talking about that a lot with kids is really, really important, especially when it comes to, you know, people that are really pulling you down and making you a lesser person.

So helping parents understand. So part of the thing with the bullying messages is that it's really volatile when middle school relationships and high school relationships obviously shift. But it's also important to remember that it's the nature of the adolescent brain for emotional response to be heightened, because that's where they are. They're in a place where they're working their frontal lobe, which is the place of reason and sort of being analytical about things isn't fully

online yet. And so they're still reacting more from this sort of amygdala, you know, place of like, Oh, I'm just going to get even, or you know, that sort of gas to the pedal to the metal sort of response.

So helping, yeah, exactly. So helping parents understand that it is the nature of relationships to shift and that sometimes relationships aren't necessarily about, you know, your kid wanting to be that person, or your kid is going to be that person. They're just trying various things out and they'll figure out what they like and then leave behind, and then understanding that just because you really want to intervene in this relationship does not mean that you should often saying you can't see a certain kid is going to backfire and bite you in the butt later on or intervening in calling the other kids parents can often, it can often really backfire on you as well. And so my default would always be to let the kids work it out, but to be that sort of supportive model in the background, explaining why you've decided to end relationships that are unhealthy for you or deciding why you've decided to pursue relationships that have been really good for you. It always comes back to that modeling what we want them and what we want to see in them.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. I mean, obviously that's kind of like a, that's an extreme case, right? If a child gets into a fight at school, I'm sure there's probably a few other things to do before we tell them about ending relationships or something like that.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Of course yeah. I mean, a lot of it, you know, there's the big divide between, Oh, well, you have to, you know, defend yourself and, you know, you should punch back and, you know, I've heard it all. But I think in the end, what it comes down to is obviously we need to seek the help of people that can help us. And, and for kids, this is part of the teaching of self-efficacy like, who are their allies? Who are the allies? And you should be having this conversation, you know, from early on before there's ever a conflict who are the people you can go to that you trust in order to counsel you on this situation. And you know, it really concerns me obviously during a time of pandemic, when, you know, it's sort of us, you know, we're very insular right now. And our networks have, are just not there in the same way that they have been, but helping kids know who their network and who their allies are, is a really important part of teaching them to self-advocate when stuff like that goes wrong at school.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. It makes sense. It's like, you know make sure that they understand where all their positive influences are.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Yeah. I mean, having the conversation about, you know, if someone says something that scares you or someone says something that makes you feel uncomfortable, who would you go and talk to? Because often, you know, parents don't think to ask that question and the kid's not going to think of it on their own. So, you know, and that my friend, Phyllis Fagel, who's written an incredible book called middle school matters. She's a middle school counselor. I love this book so much. And she talks a lot about that kind of stuff. How do you support middle school kids without running in there and fixing it for them, including when it comes to these sort of issues around bullying and or just normal social jostling? It's a fantastic book. I highly recommend it.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** It sounds like a great resource. So Jessica, tell me just how, obviously there's so much to talk about over here, right. And we just don't have the time to go through everything, but just give us a sense of kind of like, you know, how your book is structured so that the audience just has a view at a high level of the [32:08 inaudible]. And then, you know, will go in and read more about it.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** So I have the most fun job ever in that I get to spend like a couple of, usually at least a couple of years researching and researching and researching and sort of, I have these behind it. You can see me, but the audience can't, they're just stacks of like studies and I'm married to a statistician, a physician who is also an ethicist and a statistician. And so he's, you know, my backup guy, my swing man on the research sort of stuff. So I get to research like crazy. And then I come to the book and I break down the research, figure out what's relevant and what's not, and sort of give it to people in, you know, give it to sort of an all-purpose audience. And then what's really fun is, so I talk about the research in the first third of the book and then, and what I've discovered there, and then go into very, into very, very specific details about things like sports household duties, peer relationships, grades, that kind of stuff, so that we can get really, you know, micro looking at that stuff.

But we can also sort of look at the research from a broader perspective. And, you know, I get really specific with like scripts and, you know, by the way, what can a kid who's, you know, eight years old do around the house, what does a kid who's four physically and mentally capable of? And what's a kid who's eight physically, mentally capable of, and here's some ideas and there's a little in there about habits and they're about habit forming and about, you know, relationships, there's all kinds of stuff in there. So research on the front specifics on the back.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Okay. So it seems like it's quite practical actually.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Yeah. That's what I really wanted. And I have a wonderful editor at Harper who is like, Nope, get more specific. Nope, Get more specific. And so that's where the bullet lists come in of, you know, kid says this, you say, that teacher says this, you say that. So it really makes the, because that's the thing when I'm out speaking, I mean, people don't want to walk away not knowing how to use any of the information that I've just told them about. So really in the end there are certain, the one big one is, you know, this whole focus on process over product. Because every single time I hit a snag, whether it's about sports or household duties or whatever, that's bugging my kids, how do I focus on right now, this process of learning so that they can be better next time? That's sort of my moment-to-moment mantra.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Great. Sounds very helpful actually. So Jessica, what about any challenges or frustrations along the way?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Meaning specifically mine, my kids?

**JAISON DOLVANE:** It's kind of writing this book or anything that you might've actually seen. Obviously, you talked a little bit about sort of the, your experiences and [34:55 inaudible] you actually had you know, was there more as you kind of went through that? Maybe you can just talk about that.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Yeah. So I'm actually there was a big one, in the sense that so I right, the day after I wrote, finished my first draft of the gift of failure and there had been a lot of big press around the, you know, there was this huge auction, it was a big deal. People were watching, so I'm scared to death. And I hand in my book and the very next day I suffered a head injury and it messed with my ability to read and write for a little while. And so the book got pushed off a little bit, which was great because once my editor came back to the draft, she and this, I couldn't talk about this for the longest time because it made me so nauseous even talk about this. When she came back after reading the first draft, she called me to New York and she said, we need to talk.

And you know, that's going to be a great, you know, she's going to be giving me flowers, tell me the book perfect that nothing's needed. It turns out the book was terrible. It was organizationally, it was a disaster. I'd never written a book before. I mean, this was my first book. And so, you know, I wrote it in less than a year. And it was just a wreck. And so her first thing she said to me was, you know, we could get a ghost and what a ghost means is bring someone in to help me with the writing. Now I'm a professional writer at this point and I have been for a while. So that was just not going to happen. So I said, look, here's what I would really love is if you could give me feedback on everything, I did wrong, and I will try not to throw up in your office, you give me all the information and I'll digest it.

And then just give me two chapters. And we had time because of the head injury thing. And I had gotten better at this point. And I said, just give me two chapters, probationary, two chapters. Let me see if I can do it. And I had to go home digest a whole notebook worth of everything I messed up and learn how to write a book and use that to get better, learn from it, not deny that it happened, not blame it on someone else, but learn from that and move forward. And two chapters turned into four, which turned into the whole book, which turned into a New York times best-selling book. And for me, that story, I tell it to my students all the time because they say, "Oh, I hate editing." And I'm like, well, that's what writing is about. And that's how you learn and get better.

And, you know, I'm really, when I wrote this next book, when I wrote the book, the addiction and occupation, that'll be out in April. I had a big checklist of don't do these things, or have you fixed these things? Cause you make these mistakes. We know this about you, what lessons you learned? Yeah. Every single time I handed a chapter in, I went through that list. And when the addiction inoculation was in one piece and we were able to look at the edits, there was really not much to edit at all because I had learned from my mistakes and the most important thing from a parenting perspective is, I talked to my kids about this at every stage of the game, they saw me cry. They saw me get, I had a post-concussion sort of syndrome where I was depressed, and it was horrible.

They saw me go all through all of that. They saw the hit to my ego. They saw all of it and they saw me work really hard. And so they know that I am most proud of the fact that my, that the book ended up something I'm really proud of. And it's because I had to work that hard at it. And when, when the second book came with very, it came back with very few edits. They understood what that meant for me.

And they were really proud of me for that. So, you know, I got to model, you know, the things [38:26 inaudible].

**JAISON DOLVANE:** [38:26 inaudible] how to overcome hardships.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** It was horrible. I'm not going to pretend even for a moment that it wasn't a nightmare. It was a nightmare.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** So Jessica, is there one feeling as a parent that you would rather not feel?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Yeah. I hate the feeling that I have done something wrong that, I have this tendency when I think I've really stumbled as a parent. I have this bagel response where all the blood leaves my head and I feel like I'm going to pass out. Every time I've ever had a situation where someone, something major has gone wrong with my kid, I'm like, forget it. I'm a failure, that's it. It's over blood leaves my head. And I feel like I'm going to pass out. And, you know, once that immediate sort of reptilian brain response is passed and I can think, you know, in some reasonable fashion, I realized that okay, this isn't that big of a deal. We can fix this, and we can also make it better next time. And I think that's the problem is we tend to parent from the emergencies, from that emergency feeling from that like immediate amygdala fight or flight response, as opposed to taking a deep breath and thinking about it in a broader perspective, like, okay, well, how do we do better moving forward? How do we fix it moving forward? And is it even my responsibility to fix it? Or is it my child's responsibility to fix it? And that feeling is the worst because you know, the one thing you don't want to screw up, is your kids.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** That's what we're trying every single day. What has all of this kind of done for you? I mean, has there been you know, obviously you've got a New York times bestseller book. That's great. But at a deeper level, I mean do you feel like you're getting some other satisfaction?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Well, it completely changed my teaching. I mean, even as I was just initially reading the research and I was still teaching full-time in middle school, I had a full, full schedule. It really changed the way I taught. I did a lot more, there was a lot more peer to peer teaching. There was a lot more me moving

back and not being the Sage on the stage, just downloading lots in my brain to the kids. Once I started learning about what works for good learning, my classroom changed quite a bit.

And at home, you know, my kids will joke that at a certain point every once in a while, they'll just call me on it. And they'll say, you know, could you just stop doing this gift of failure thing and start helping me? But the nice thing about that is what I know when they do that is that they really need me. They're not just defaulting to do this for me. They're saying now I really need your help. And there've been enough moments now where I can see that I really wanted to take over and I really wanted to fix it. And here's what happened because I didn't, and I still have to fight that fight. As we've just said, I had to fight it today. You know, this need to want to fix and glue together and pick up the scraps and make something work. And that's not, what is going to determine whether or not I've been a quote successful parent is that my kids can go out there in the world and they can self-advocate and they can tell people what they need, find what they need and stand up for themselves and that they continue to be engaged in becoming better human beings for the sake of being better human beings not be for the sake of a higher salary or the sake of an A or whatever that thing is.

So I have two, the thing I'm most proud of is that I have two kids who love to learn, and isn't always the thing they're being asked to learn at that moment, but they both love to learn. And that for me is a big success.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** When you like that, then you're going to keep building upon it. That's great.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** I would really love it if I could you know, hone the target a little and say, could you love to love [42:26 inaudible] right now? Or could you love to learn, you know, statistics right now? That would be really great for me, but you know, it isn't always....

**JAISON DOLVANE:** They will find their own way, right?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Yeah. My aim isn't that good quite yet.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** What's your hope for your audience?

**JESSICA LAHEY:** My hope for my audience is that I keep getting these emails of kids figuring out how to move the wash from the laundry to the dryer or that, you know, I have kept in touch, there's a kid at the end of gift of failure, who was going to be kicked out of his school because he was failing out that kid I've stayed in touch with him and his mom, that kid went on to take control of his education, grow up, and he really needed to grow up was really part of the problem because she, his mom had been doing everything for him. And she had to admit that she'd been doing everything for him. He really grew up and he went to, he ended up going on to his first-choice school with a ton of scholarship money for all of the growth and all of the learning that he'd done, more than anything else though, especially with the next book. I really, actually, with both books, I just really, really want kids to be seen and heard and known for who they are and not who we wish they were.

I feel like when I get to talk to kids, when I get to go out to schools and do talks, the kids tell me over and over and over again, could you please tell my parents? I'm not my brother. I'm not my sister. I'm not this imaginary person. They think they're raising. I'm not them when they were my age, you know, that kind of thing. I want to be my own person and they just don't see, hear or know me. So, my advice to parents is often, you know, we have to love the kids we have not the kids we wish we have, and we can't just love them based on their performance. So that's my biggest wish.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Yeah. Some very, very insightful stuff here Jessica and I know you're writing another book.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** So I'm actually onto my third book now, but the second book comes out in April. It's called the addiction inoculation, raising healthy kids in a culture of dependence. It's about my experience in recovery. My experience with raising two boys who have this sort of genetic specter and epigenetic specter of addiction over their heads and working with kids in a drug and alcohol rehab for five years. So that book will be out in April and then I'm working on my third book after that.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Well, that's great. Maybe we can have you back at some point and talk about that book.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** That would be lovely. I would love that. And there's a whole chapter in the addiction book about what schools need to be doing. Only 57% of schools have a substance abuse prevention program and only 10% of those are evidence-based.

**JAISON DOLVANE:** Oh, that's amazing. So I'm sure there's going to be lots of interesting things in there. Well, thank you, Jessica. I really appreciate you being here.

**JESSICA LAHEY:** Thank you so much for having me.

### [Links & Resources]

Jessica's Website

<https://www.jessicalahey.com>

Buy the Book: Gift of Failure

<https://www.amazon.com/Gift-Failure-Parents-Children-Succeed-ebook/dp/0062299255/?tag=jessicalcom-20>