



Inspiring Young Girls to be Entrepreneurs

Brian Weisfeld
Founder, The Startup Squad

EPISODE 43

[Quote]

“It’s a great way to start to deal with rejection, and taking a risk, and failure...those are skills you need in life.”

[Description]

NOT every girl wants to be a princess. Some want to run the castle. Design the moat. Or break the glass slipper and open a company with better footwear.



The Startup Squad empowers girls with an entrepreneurial mindset so they can realize their potential, whatever their passions.

In this episode, we talk to Brian Weisfeld on how he helps girls learn basic business skills, grit, a growth mindset, how to fail, and start again. And again.

[Intro]

Jaison Dolvane:

Not every girl wants to be a princess. Some want to run the castle. Design the moat. Or break the glass slipper and open a company with better footwear.

The Startup Squad empowers girls with an entrepreneurial mindset so they can realize their potential, whatever their passions. It is about helping them become more than they can imagine, by exploring entrepreneurship at an early age. It teaches them basic business skills and helps them learn grit, a growth mindset, and how to fail, and then start again. And again.

Brian Weisfeld, after a rewarding career with world-class brands, like IMAX and Coupons.com, found inspiration through his daughters to create The Startup Squad. He says “When my oldest daughter was 8 years old, she struggled to sell Girl Scout cookies, and then fumbled around trying to run a charity bake sale with a friend. She was incredibly enthusiastic! But she didn’t know what to do while she stood at the end of our driveway, surrounded by delicious baked goods.”

In this episode, Brian shares with us advice on how to inspire and develop the entrepreneurial spirit in young girls, for them to change the world and improve lives around them.

[Episode Transcript]

JAISON DOLVANE: All right. Welcome, Brian.

BRIAN WEISFELD: Thank you.

JAISON DOLVANE: Good to have you here. And I know we were trying to get this together for a while, so I'm excited to have you here today.

BRIAN WEISFELD: Always happy to chat with you.

JAISON DOLVANE: Good stuff. So, Brian, tell me sort of your inspiration and maybe a little bit of your background that brought you to what you're doing now.

BRIAN WEISFELD: Well, you know, it's certainly not what I expected I would be doing now. You know, I've spent my career helping entrepreneurs grow and scale their businesses. So in the early 1990s, I was part of a three-person team that bought IMAX, the giant screen movie theater company, when it was mostly just museum and science center based theaters. And, you know, we sort of helped to turn them into what it is today with IMAX theaters and in movie theaters across the nation in the world. I helped to scale a technology distribution company back east and then I

moved to Silicon valley, oh my goodness 13 years ago now to be the chief operating officer of coupons.com and help to grow that digital coupon business from essentially you know, a startup of a hundred people and 15 million of revenue to a 500 person, \$150 million revenue company getting ready to go public.

And I was just looking for the next company to help grow and scale. I was talking to a lot of entrepreneurs and founders about trying to find the right opportunity and the right partner to find the next company to grow. But I've got two daughters. And as you said in the intro, you know, my older daughter was eight years old and she was having her first entrepreneurial experiences. She was selling girl scout cookies. She was running a charity bake sale and she loved it. She was having a lot of fun, but it was clear she didn't know what to do. And it was, my wife was the one that said to her, you know, Hey, when people walk by, you got to say good morning and to get their attention and make sure you look people in the eye when you talk to them.

And you know, when she was running this charity bake sale, she said, tell people all the money goes to charity, because even if they don't want to buy a brownie, maybe they'll still give you a couple of dollars. And, you know, it's funny. I didn't really think much of it at the time, but then fast forward to about a month later, I was lying in bed reading books to my daughters and my older daughter was on my right side. And she was reading from the, who was series these biographies for kids that are just wonderful. They've got, who was Martin Luther king and who is DaVinci. And, you know, who was Wayne Gretzky. I mean, they're awesome. And so she was reading who was queen Elizabeth. My younger daughter was in kindergarten, and then she was on my other side. And as fate would have it, the books you want to me to read to her that day was like the 57th book of the rainbow fairy princess unicorn rainbow series.

And, you know, I just got tired of all of that lowest, common denominator marketing to girls. I just had read one too many of these books. And while I absolutely give those books a ton of credit for helping my daughter's imagination and making her want to learn how to read my older daughter was on the other side of me getting the exact same benefit while she was learning about queen Elizabeth. And I have no idea why, but those two experiences laying there in that bed on a Sunday morning, those two experiences combined in my brain. And I said, I'm going to create this novel

series to get girls interested in entrepreneurship, to get them to open up that first lemonade stand or bake sale. And just to start to think like an entrepreneur and what we'll talk, I'm sure about the entrepreneurial mindset and why is this important.

But, you know, I've just seen it with my own daughter that shy eight year old girl who didn't know what to say you know, to someone when they were walking by is now you know, a very self, you know, almost two self-sufficient 15 year old high schooler, you know, has represented her school and our country at like global climate conferences. And a lot of that, I credit to those experiences, selling lemonade and cookies and baked goods. And so I've seen the power of that entrepreneurship. And so the startup squad is all about getting more girls to take that first leap and start that first business.

JAISON DOLVANE: So, you know, going back to kind of, you know, your daughter or really any child who is standing at the edge of the driveway and not knowing what to really do or what to do in terms of successfully selling girl scout cookies, tell us about how do we start to walk our kids through that.

BRIAN WEISFELD: So I think it's a lot of it is just having them have these experiences. So the first thing is, think of something that your kid is passionate about. And first of all, I should say that, you know, the startup squad is we describe ourselves as girl targeted, but boy inclusive. A lot of things we talk about, there's no reason why, you know, this isn't for boys as well. It's just our primary market is reaching girls because I saw an opportunity, I wanted it for my own daughters. So forgive me if I, you know, for those listeners that have sons or I'm talking about, you know, if I say girls, are I switched back and forth, be co-ed anyway. Now that I've given you the caveat, I've totally forgotten the question, [05:15 inaudible] parents do.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Like what do we do next? Because I mean, it's heartbreaking in a way, Right?

BRIAN WEISFELD: Well, the first thing is, I think find something that your child is passionate about. You know, do they like baking, do they like sewing? Do they like sports? Do they, you know, what is it that they like? And then how can that become a business? And, you know, virtually anything can become a business. On our website we've got videos of 90 different girls between the ages of 6 and 16 who will run their own

businesses. So there's, and we've got plenty of blog articles, but I guess [05:48 inaudible], so that's easy to sort of, but find something that your kid is passionate about, because that will be that much more interested in the business.

And then just have him start. And the whole thing is just, is let them make mistakes and let them get comfortable with failure. And as you said, if your child is sitting there, you know, like my daughter was gently prompt, you know, gently prompt her to say, Hey, you got to, you know, try to get someone's attention, but you kind of let them stumble and let them fail, but then find the little lessons you can provide. And there are just, there are life lessons that you will see. One of my favorite stories is my daughter goes to a summer camp up in the Sonoma Napa area. And it's our favorite place on earth. And about five years ago, it burned down in one of the wildfires. And so she wanted to raise money. And so she was selling lemonade and brownies in our driveway to raise money to rebuild the camp.

And a woman walked by and said, what are you selling? And my daughter said, lemonade and brownies. And the woman said, I'll take a glass of lemonade and give her a dollar and walked away. And you know, that became a life lesson moment. I said to my daughter, I said, you don't always have to answer the question that was asked and make sure to focus on your why, not your what. And I explained this to her, then a few minutes later, a guy in a white pickup truck pulls over and he jumps out and he says to my daughter, what are you selling? And she says, well, my summer camp burned down. And so I'm selling lemonade and brownies to raise money to rebuild it. And the guy said, I'll take a lemonade and a brownie, give her 10 bucks, and said, keep the change. That's a life lesson from a lemonade stand.

So about what's your why and how to sell and those sorts of things. And so I think, you know, I would say first is encourage your child finds that they're passionate about just go and get started and then let them find their way, let them make those mistakes and give them little nudges along the way to help them. And, you know, they'll get comfortable with failing. Cause a lot of people say, no, it may take you, you know, calling your neighbor or putting on Facebook to, or you're emailing your best friend to say, Hey, my kid's really struggling on here would you come, you know, buy a cup of lemonade, and help their confidence a little bit. But you know, for the most part, let them go and let them learn and let them get comfortable with that failure and risk and all those sorts of great things.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, those are all great points. So tell me how the startup squad kind of help [08:11 inaudible].

BRIAN WEISFELD: Well, so the goal is with the books, I described the books as part inspiration, part information and part aspiration. So the startup squad is a fun, novel series about for sixth grade girls who do everything that sixth grade girls do. And they've got friend issues and family issues in school issues and pet issues and all those sorts of things. But they're also running businesses on the side, the first book they run a lemonade stand. And the second book they're selling t-shirts to raise money for one of their brothers bands. And the third book our lead character gets a job doing calligraphy for the crate place cards for a wedding. And the wedding planner gets sick and she's got to take over the whole wedding planning as a 13 old.

And so the idea of the stories, the stories of very light on the business stuff, we're not hammering kids over the head with this sort of thing. They're just fun stories that we hope will inspire readers to say, Hey, that sounds like fun. I want to start my own business. But then what we do is in the back of the book, we have a nonfiction section with actual business tips for kids, and we refer back to the narrative. And so we use the narrative to tell the story. And so we will say, to explain that the business point, so we'll say, Hey, remember when the girls were making a big sign for their lemonade stand, well, that's actually called marketing and here's some tips you can use to market your own business. And so that's the information section. So now once they've been inspired to start a business, we give them some tips and tools to do a better job of it.

And the last section is the aspiration section. We have an interview with an, every book is an interview with an actual girl CEO, a tween or teen girl who runs her own business because we want the readers to realize that just because they're starting, just because they're a kid, it doesn't mean it can't be a big business. And so that's what the startup squad is all about is inspiring kids to get started. And while we were doing it right now with books, we also have a lot of resources for parents and for kids on our website, we're working on some you know, a bunch of other different ways that we can reach and impact kids. And we've done a lot of work with charities as well to donate thousands over 10,000 books to kids that couldn't otherwise afford a copy, because we want all kids to have access to this entrepreneurial mindset, not just those who can afford to buy a copy of the book.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Well, that's really, really good. So Brian, tell me you know, we are in a world where a lot of these things around like selling girl scout cookies and bake sales, and certainly, you know I think you look around the same age as me. So, you know, back in our days, I mean, we didn't have like the internet as much. And so a lot of it was kind of like selling in person now the world's changing so much and there's so much more influence on Instagram and Tik Tok. And, you know, it makes it seem like it's just easy to do. And you know, my daughter's tried to do a business that's digital and it's really hard and it's a whole set of different skills. And it actually takes more money to make money on digital versus going door to door. So explain to me sort of how you know, kids could go about that and where does that kind of fit in within what you guys are trying to do?

BRIAN WEISFELD: So it's all entrepreneurship. And so whether it's a digital product or an actual product, I think it makes sense. And it's frankly, it's easier than ever for kids to get started because you know, either the child or the parent opens up an Instagram account for the name of the business, puts up a couple of pictures and says of their cookies, and says DM me for your orders. And all of a sudden they're in business, that's it. So it can be extremely inexpensive and extremely simple. A lot of these kids, you know, we've got 13, 14 year old girls have 20,000 followers on Instagram. So, you know, I, I'm learning from them about this sort of stuff. And so a kid that's digitally native can go to, if your child understands social media, have them go to the local pizza place, the local beauty parlor or whatever the local businesses and say, Hey, you know, let me teach you how to run your Instagram account or let me run your Instagram account. That's an amazing business for them.

And so I think you know, there are a lot of digital opportunities and obviously, you know, kids that know how to code or even that know how to build a simple website on Wix or Squarespace, same thing. Can go to the local businesses and turn that into a business. And so there's a ton of opportunities. And I think you get, you know, a lot of that same experience. I do think it's important though, to have that face-to-face contact. And so, you know, whether it's a local children's business fair or setting up shop in front of a friendly local business to sell your products, having some of that face-to-face communication, I think also is extremely important even for a digital business.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Are they different skills though? You know, in terms of like selling face-to-face versus selling digitally?

BRIAN WEISFELD: I mean, I think there are one is, you know, how do you come up with an email, with a good email pitch or a good you know, proposition or creating you know, using you know, Canva or whatever the tool is to create a nice looking brochure. But I think at the same time, it's still selling, right. It's still how you get your message across, how do you convince someone to get interested in your product and ultimately buy your product? And so, yeah, it's two different forms of communication, but I think it can be the same skill, but I said, I think it's important for kids to develop both of those skills because you know, as I said, I saw with my daughter just, you know, from a shy kid to being more comfortable is a lot of that face-to-face interaction.

And it's a great way to do it. It's a great, you know, as I used the lemonade stand example, because it's so ubiquitous, it's, you know, more people are going to say no than yes. And so it's a great way to start to deal with rejection and taking a risk and failure and all those sorts of things that frankly, you know, those are skills you need in life. And if you can develop, I'm actually reading a book right now by the former CEO called choose possibility by the former CEO of stubhub that just came out and it's all about, you know, helping adults deal with risk and why risk is okay and little risks and those sorts of things. And what we're trying to do is through entrepreneurship also is to help kids develop that risk muscle so that when you become an adult and you have these much larger stakes decisions, they've already developed the risk muscle and they're like, you know what? I'm going to go for it. And that's an incredible skill.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. It makes sense. You know, one of the fears that parents might have and especially if they haven't come from an entrepreneurial background might be that, you know, we don't want our kids to sort of do this because what if they fail, it's going to be not a good thing for their confidence. What would you say to them?

BRIAN WEISFELD: So, first of all, what better time to fail than you know, when you're a kid, as opposed to when you're, you know, an adult with two kids and a mortgage. So but also everyone fails, right? Part of life is failure. And success is rebounding from that failure and learning from it. What I say to kids and I present a school groups and girl scout, troops, and

kids all across the country is the only failure is not taking that risk. I ask kids if you've ever heard that expression, win some, lose some, that entrepreneurs don't say that. Entrepreneurs say win some, learn some, because they know even if they fail, they're going to learn something that's going to help them be more successful. And so, yes, that first business may be a failure, but they're going to learn something that's going to help them with the second one, which might be a failure too.

But the third one, now they've got those experiences behind him that has a much greater chance of success. And so far better to start failing and picking yourself back up than to be afraid of taking that risk.

JAISON DOLVANE: Obviously, you know sort of hidden in what you're saying over there is this kind of concept of grit, right? Is the resilience. And so is that something that can be taught or how is it learned?

BRIAN WEISFELD: So I think it's unquestionably learned by doing, and it's as I said, it's funny, it's timely that I'm reading this book that, you know, each and there was actually also someone I just saw present yesterday on the topic of grit. You know, each time you take that little, small risk, you're getting more comfortable with taking that larger risk. And so I think, you know, there are, if you don't take risks, you're going to be afraid with, you're going to be afraid of taking that big one. But if you take lots of small risks over time, that bigger one is suddenly not going to seem, not going to seem so big. And so over, getting comfortable with the opportunity, doing something that you may fail at because you realize that even if I do it, what's the worst thing that's going to happen, right? Especially if you're a kid, what's the worst thing that can happen to your businesses. You know, your business is not going to succeed.

So to start, you know so I think it's unquestionably something that we can instill in our kids and get them to learn. And I think you have to celebrate those failures right? Around the dinner table, you know, a lot of kids think their parents are, you know, are these perfect human beings, right? Kids don't unfortunately, but so around the dinner table, share your failures, man, that I messed something up today and this is what I did. And this is what I learned from it, make them realize it's okay to fail.

So there's a famous story about Sara Blakely, the founder of Spanx, their family used to sit around the dinner table and the dad would say, what did

you fail at this week? And if they had an answer of what they failed at, he would give them a high five, you know, great job, you know, and if they didn't, he would be really disappointed. So celebrate those failures when a kid screw something up, say, oh, wow. You know, okay, what did you learn from it? And what are you going to do differently next time?

JAISON DOLVANE: So you've got a bunch of girls CEOs, young girls CEOs that you've kind of highlighted on your website. How do you sort of come across these young entrepreneurs?

BRIAN WEISFELD: Two ways. One is through, we'll find them through either Instagram or, you know, I'm always searching online for girl entrepreneurs. I read, I'll hear news stories. You know, you'll hear the news story about the girl, open the little lemonade stand and raised \$20,000 for the first responders in our town. So I'm always reaching out to those people and saying, Hey, you know, we'd love to help you tell your story. And at the same time now, you know, because of what we do, a lot of girls will reach out to us as well. And we're always looking for more girls that we can share their stories. And the first thing we do is we'll have their videos on our website, but then we share their stories on social media. And when I used to travel around the country United States, whenever I was in a town, I would try to set up something with the local TV station, with a local girl preneur and bring her with me. And so I've done that in many places. And I look forward to getting back and doing that again cause we're always looking at to help these girls tell their stories.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, that's great. So, Brian, what have been some of the challenges for you as you've kind of embarked on this journey?

BRIAN WEISFELD: Well, the big one was, you know, I was lying in bed saying I'm going to write a novel for these, you know, for elementary school girls. And I've never written anything in my life and I've written business plans and conference calls, speeches, and memos. But I don't know how to write. So you know, truly one of the first things I did is I went out and about writing children's books for dummies and I spent, you know, we talk about getting comfortable with failure and rejection. I spent three of the hardest, most humbling years of my entire career learning how to write for kids. I went to writing conferences. I took writing classes at local schools. I read books about writing. I hired freelance children's book editors to work with

me. And I got rejection after rejection, after rejection and failure, failure, failure.

And when I talk to kids, I show them my rejection letters. These are all the way and I tell them the story about the woman, the editor, who said that my writing for kids was so bad that she was surprised to find out that I actually had children. It's a true story. And the first person I ever met within the publishing industry said, if you were my friend, I would tell you not to waste your time. And so, you know, learning how to write and doing this, which is something, you know, I'm a left brain person and having to turn my right brain on or whatever that maybe I've reversed those was unquestionably the hardest part of this whole journey.

JAISON DOLVANE: Wow. Yeah. I mean, it sounds pretty amazing in terms of just you being able to pick back up from that and changing from, I mean, probably just even having a mindset of how to think about writing a book for a child is amazing in itself.

BRIAN WEISFELD: Yeah. It was quite the journey. As a matter of fact, if anyone's interested, I did a Ted talk. If you just search on TEDx Weisfeld I share some of the more colorful parts of the journey and the things that had to overcome.

JAISON DOLVANE: That is great. And we'll put that Ted talk link in our show notes also, that'd be good. So how has all this kind of changed you? You know, you kind of started with this idea of inspiring entrepreneurs or trying to actually get them some sort of tools that they can use to, you know, develop themselves. And, you know, you've written a couple of books now and you're kind of continuing this journey. So how have some of this kind of transformed you?

BRIAN WEISFELD: In two ways. One is from that first moment of laying in bed, it opened my eyes to seeing, you know, what products and how products are marketed to girls. You know, and as you said, in the opening, that's one of the things we talk about on our website, not every girl wants to grow up to be a princess. Some of them want to be an architect to build a castle. And so I just continue to push, to focus to get more of those different options for kids, for girls. So there's different things to read. That's the first one, the second one is just truly seeing the power of entrepreneurship.

We did a program with 10 underserved girls from a pretty tough, from growing up in a pretty tough area of New York and where we had a local female entrepreneur lead them through an entrepreneurship program where these girls develop their own products. And at the end of this eight or 10 weeks, you know, the feedback we got from parents were, my daughter is better behaved. She's paying more attention in school. She's getting along better with her friends, these are nine year old girls who were transformed through this entrepreneurship experience. And so that's, it's really, it's blown me away to see the impact that it's had. And it just, you know, what gets me you know, going every morning to want to reach and impact more girls.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. That's amazing. You know, it's kind of like the concept of taking, you know, when you start adding back to society, it kind of creates the success cycle that you can kind of keep building on. And the opposite of that is kind of destructive. So I ask this question to most of my guests. So the question is, you know, is there a one feeling that you have as a parent that you would rather not feel?

BRIAN WEISFELD: Certainly. Every parent worries about their kid. I think that's the one thing is to worry. You know, I had, I heard someone once talk and say that you know, when your child is an infant, you are making a hundred percent of the decisions for the child. But when your child leaves for university or college, they're going to be making a hundred percent of their own decisions and that your job as a parent is to work them through that continuum so that you can position them to be able to make all the decisions on their own and be independent adults. And so, you know, just the worry of, you know, every day, are you doing the right thing? And are your kids, you know, working around that continuum to be you know, nice functioning self-sufficient adults. Yeah, I would love to wake up in the morning and just have something in my inbox and said, yep, you're on schedule. Don't worry about it. But you know, unfortunately it's not that simple.

JAISON DOLVANE: You don't have that many feedback loops [25:22 inaudible]. Good stuff. So what is kind of your hope for you know, the young girls that you're kind of teaching?

BRIAN WEISFELD: Well, I think first of all, in the world we live in the first hope is that everyone stays healthy and safe and, you know, life goes back to normal. But I think the hope is that every girl that we touch can

reach her potential in life, regardless of what the potential is. I mean, I don't want every girl to grow up to be an entrepreneur. This isn't necessarily about creating the next generation of female CEOs. Although if we did that, certainly wouldn't be the worst thing, but this is about the entrepreneurial mindset. Girls that have that entrepreneurial mindset that are comfortable with risk and comfortable with failure and see opportunities instead of problems, and know how to sell something. Those girls will be more successful in life regardless of the path they choose. And so that's the hope is that the girls that we touched and through entrepreneurship will be able to reach their potential in life regardless of what it is that they do.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. No, that makes sense. So Brian what's kind of next for the Startup squad?

BRIAN WEISFELD: Well, we are working on the next set of books for the startup squad. We've got some interesting things in the work that we're not ready to talk about yet, but hopefully we'll be soon. We are continuing to do some of these programs. I mentioned the program that we did in New York with the some underserved girls, that was incredibly impactful. And so we're doing a larger pilot of that program coming up soon. We do a ton of work with girl scout troops because a lot of the lessons that we talk about in the book, the lessons that you, are extremely applicable to cookie selling. And so we're getting ready for the next cookie selling season. And we've got a lot of cookies line tips on our website as well. And just every way that we can reach and impact girls, we're working on.

JAISON DOLVANE: Got it. So where can, where can people reach you guys?

BRIAN WEISFELD: So our website is the www.thestartupsquad.com. We are on all major social media, all major social media platforms at the startup squad. And one thing I'll offer up to the reaching roots audience is if anyone is interested and picks up a copy of the startup squad, email me at info@thestartupsquad.com and just send me your address. And I will send you a signed book plate so that you, a little sticker you can put in your book and so your child to have a signed copy of the startup squad, as well as we've got like stickers and bookmarks and temporary tattoos and all that other stuff that I'd be happy to share. So just email info@thestartupsquad.com and we'll personalize your son or daughter's start up squad experience.

JAISON DOLVANE: That is great. And I'm sure some of them will take you up on it. Good stuff. Well, thank you so much, Brian. I really appreciate you being here. It is Wonderful.

BRIAN WEISFELD: Yeah. Thank you. And thanks for all that you do sharing such great advice with for parents because we certainly need it.

JAISON DOLVANE: Thank you.

[Outro]

Thank you for listening.

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