

Esther Jackson Elementary Counseling Corner

Ensuring College and Career Readiness for Every Student

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Raising Confident, Independent Children
How the scaffold parenting method empowers growth

Clinical Expert: Harold S. Koplewicz, MD

This is an excerpt from *The Scaffold Effect*, a new book by Harold S. Koplewicz, MD, the president of the Child Mind Institute.

When our kids are young, our job is to be fixers, protectors, and social secretaries. We childproof the house so they can't get under the sink and block the stairs so they don't fall down. We set up playdates and throw their parties. We call their teachers when there's a problem. But at some point along the way, the parents' job changes, without warning or indication, and we become consultants. Our job then is to help them find solutions for themselves.

The Scaffold Effect Shifting from "fixer" to consultant is a major change, and you might have a hard time with that. As parents, we're socialized for the fixer/protector role, to step in and take care of the problem. If your kid falls down and scrapes his knee, your instinct is to put a Band-Aid on it, and say, "It's okay, sweetie. I'll make it better." Then they go back to playing and you feel good about having done your job as a fixer well.

However, you can't put a Band-Aid on a social rejection or a failure experience. There is no instant fix when a twelve-year-old girl is suddenly cast out of her friend group, or when an eight-year-old boy struggles to memorize math tables and starts to believe he's stupid. You can't protect a child from the trials of life. But you can give your kid armor by teaching him to advocate for himself, and thereby develop the grit he needs to survive and succeed.

If your child gets a poor grade on a test, for example, a fix-it parent would say, "You should call the teacher to talk about what happened. You should meet with your friend who's great at math and get some tutoring. You should study harder." You should, you should, you should. Listen to how you talk to your child. When you hear that phrase, be aware that you are in fix-it mode, essentially choosing and handing him tools.

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The Growth Zone

A psychological state is often called “a zone.” In the active construction site that is your child’s development, it helps to be aware of her various zones, as well as which are the safe and unsafe areas.

The Comfort Zone. This is a no-anxiety, no-stress figurative place where a person feels safe and secure, believes he’s in control, and can do any social, emotional, behavioral, or academic task easily, without help from parents or teachers. In the Comfort Zone, a child can build confidence and self-esteem. He is secure doing the activity; he enjoys it because he’s proficient. It might feel good to hang out here; it might be a bit boring, too. Since growth comes from learning new things, and learning requires you to be vulnerable in your ignorance and inexperience, the child will have to leave the Comfort Zone in order to grow.

The Growth Zone. Maximal learning and growth happen in the area just outside the Comfort Zone, when the child is reaching and stretching to acquire new skills. Russian educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed that educating children in the “zone of proximal development”—just beyond their current capacity, not too far from where they already are—inspires kids to become independent problem solvers and self-motivated learners. The theory holds up in the context of scaffolding a child’s emotional, social, and behavior learning as well. Learning, aka growth, an ongoing process of reaching for more, is always empowered by parent-child collaboration. You’re in it together, but once your child learns what he needs to learn, he can move on, and up, to the next level, while you cheer him on from the near distance of the scaffold.

Failure Is an Option

For your kids, you scaffold their current and future growth by teaching them to take risks, despite the very real possibility of going splat.

Labeled praise plays a major part here. If you want your kids to be more proactive and prosocial, you have to praise them when they try. Be careful about what you praise, though. If you praise success, your kids learn to think that failure is bad. But failure isn’t good or bad. It’s just one possible outcome.

Emily, a fourteen-year-old girl with severe anxiety disorder, always became extremely worried in the days leading up to her midterm and final exams. Her mother Diana’s reaction to her daughter’s stress was to tell Emily to study harder, but that wasn’t helpful. Obsessive studying was a symptom of Emily’s anxiety, not a coping, calming strategy. It was like giving a drug addict permission to smoke more crack.

We coached Diana to scaffold Emily with nonjudgmental validation and by presenting failure as just a thing that sometimes happens, to say to her daughter, “I hear you. You’re worried that you’re going to fail. Maybe you will, and that’s okay.”

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To scaffold, parents support and encourage the child to learn how to select the right tool for the particular task all by himself. He might choose wrong, and then you can guide him to evaluate why that particular tool wasn't the best choice. Next time, he'll try something new.

It's not that you are letting him hang out there on his own. You are standing by and collaborating with him to come up with his own solutions. Instead of his depending on you for answers, you will guide him to come up with ideas about how he can do it for himself.

With the "death threat" of failure off the table, Emily could turn her deficit (anxiety) into an asset (productivity). She still prepared twice as much as her peers and always met with teachers for reassurance. But by telling herself failure was fine, by releasing that valve, the destructive "I can't do this!" anxiety was gone. Diana had to send the same message many times. But eventually, the message sunk in, and Emily, now a young woman, flings herself into intimidating job opportunities. "Failure isn't fatal," she said. "I'll just try again."

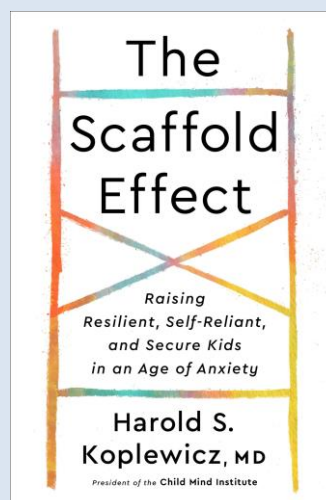
A parent's fear of failure and rejection on the child's behalf leads to the parent riding to the rescue to save the day, by doing his homework, calling teachers and coaches, taking care of every tiny thing for their kids.

The irony of swooping in is that parents believe they're helping their kids by preventing pain. But what they're actually preventing is growth.

Excerpt from *The Scaffold Effect: Raising Resilient, Self-Reliant, and Secure Kids in an Age of Anxiety*. Copyright © 2021 by Child Mind Institute, Inc. Published by Harmony Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

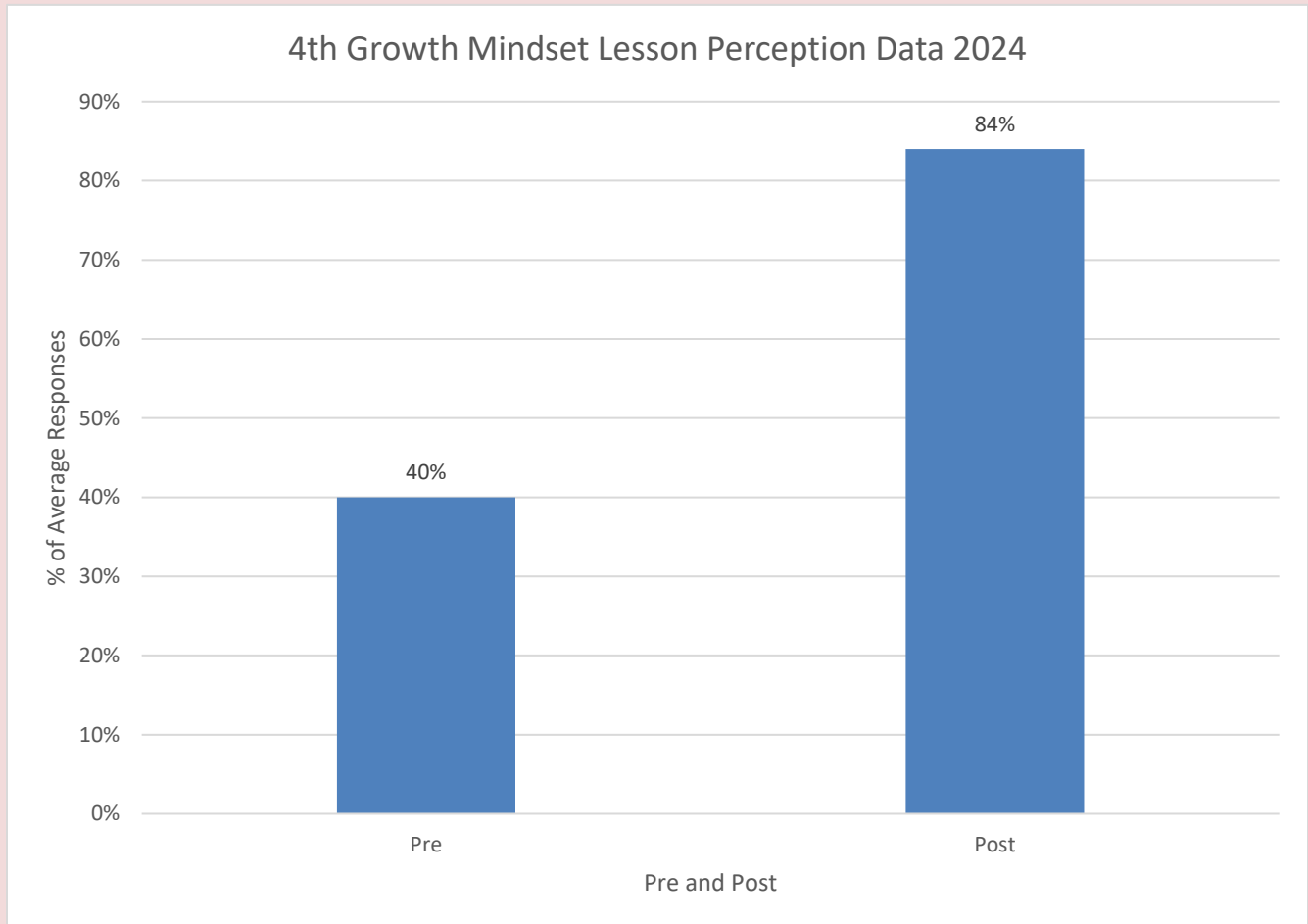
[Learn more about The Scaffold Effect here.](#)

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A Little Bit of Counseling Program Data



April Core Curriculum Lessons

All students will be taught a lesson on conflict resolution.

