

# Esther Jackson Elementary Counseling Corner

*Ensuring College and Career Readiness for Every Student*

*Myriam Seoane, LPC*

Email: [Seoanem@fultonschools.org](mailto:Seoanem@fultonschools.org) Phone 470-254-9553

<https://mseoane.weebly.com/>

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## How to Help Kids Learn to Fail

Only through trial and error can children become resilient adults

Writer: Beth Arky

Clinical Expert: Amanda G. Mintzer, PsyD

Parents tend to see their mission as helping their kids succeed. But there's a growing realization among teachers and other professionals who work with children that kids increasingly need help learning how to fail.

Not learning to tolerate failure leaves kids vulnerable to anxiety. It leads to meltdowns when the inevitable failure does occur, whether it happens in preschool or college. And perhaps even more important, it can make kids give up trying—or trying new things.

That's why Michael Jordan, one of the world's greatest athletes, has spent years preaching the importance of losing. Jordan has spoken extensively about how perseverance and resilience in the face of challenges on and off the court are what have made him a winner.

Unfortunately, as the world puts increased pressure on kids to be winners, and parents feel compelled to enable them in every way possible, we're seeing more and more kids who become distraught over even the smallest misstep.

Take Sara's son John, who started taking piano lessons at 6. "Every time he played a wrong note he would pick up the music booklet and hit himself on the head with it!" she says. "His piano teacher said she'd never seen a kid who was so hard on himself. I told him when he made a mistake to treat himself the way he'd treat his younger cousin, that no one can learn if someone's being mean to them, and that he wasn't allowed to be mean to himself."

When Alicia's daughter Sara was 14, she became so distraught over not getting into a selective high school, while friends did, she began to self-harm. "It was so terrible: the pressure, the disappointment," says Alicia.

Clearly, distress or frustration tolerance is an important life skill to master. When it comes to school, "the ability to tolerate imperfection—that something is not going exactly your way—is oftentimes more important to learn than whatever the content subject is," says Amanda Mintzer, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Building that skill set is necessary for kids to be able to become more independent and succeed in future endeavors, whether it's personal goals, academic goals, or just learning how to effectively deal with other people."

So how do parents teach kids to fail? Dr. Mintzer offers a multistep process:

### **First, show empathy**

Empathize with your child; see that she's in distress. "Don't just say, 'It's okay, you'll do better next time,'" Dr. Mintzer says. "It's invalidating to brush off a child's feelings of frustration and disappointment." Instead, parents need to change their language: "I see you're really disappointed, I know you really wanted to do better."

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## Make yourself a model

You can explain that failure is a part of life and happens to everyone, even you. You could share examples of “failures” you’ve had. “Parents can model how to handle their own disappointment,” such as losing out on a promotion at work, Dr. Mintzer says. “Kids aren’t necessarily exposed to the reality that life includes mistakes, missteps, and even failures. As much as everyone likes things to go according to plan, it’s important to teach our children that it is also okay when they don’t.”

## Make it a teachable moment

A child’s failure is a chance for parents to teach acceptance and problem-solving skills. You and your child can try to come up with what she could do the next time for a better chance at success. For instance, could they study differently or talk to the teacher about any problems they’re having before a test?

“It’s a balance of acceptance and change,” Dr. Mintzer says. “It’s about accepting that the situation is what it is and building frustration tolerance while also asking, ‘Can we change something in the future. Can we learn from this?’”

## The minefield of social media

At the same time, kids need to know that sometimes when we fail or face disappointment, there’s not a lot we can do about it in that moment; we have to accept it as a part of life and move on. Dr. Mintzer notes as an example the minefield that is social media.

Say a girl’s friends tell her they can’t hang out with her and then she sees them together on Instagram or Facebook.

“That really hurts,” Dr. Mintzer says. “There are lots of emotions: frustration, disappointment, sadness, anger. How does she deal with that? Calling friends and screaming at them only makes things worse. She could ignore it and pretend she never saw, but that’s not going to make her feel better or change what happens in the future.”

So how can a parent help her accept what happened? The girl might be able to get more information to make herself feel better. Perhaps she can talk to these kids in a calm way, telling them that she saw the photos and her feelings were hurt. Maybe she’ll discover a reason behind it. But she may not get an answer she likes, or get one at all.

That leads to another life lesson: Sometimes we get left out, sometimes we aren’t liked, and we have to learn to cope with that truth without making the situation worse. Dr. Mintzer notes, “A lot of these skills are needed for interpersonal relationships.”



### Step back and allow kids to fail

It can be very tough to watch your child fall down but they can only learn how to handle disappointment through trial and error. As books like *The Blessings of a Skinned Knee* and the newly released *Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed* emphasize, parents must stop hovering. Otherwise, they rob children of the very experiences that require problem-solving and set them on the path to **resilience and the confidence to take on new challenges.**

### Therapy can help

If a child can't function because of a fear of failure, therapy may be called for. Even if a child doesn't have an anxiety diagnosis,

they may be frozen with anxiety. When that happens, Dr. Mintzer says, with what's called exposure therapy, "we slowly expose them to things that aren't perfect."

For instance, parents will complain that homework takes forever because a child will repeatedly rip it up and start over. "We're teaching kids that it's okay to misspell a word and keep going," she says. "In a session we might have them write a paragraph or two and make as many mistakes as they can, including sloppy handwriting, to get them used to the idea that it 's not the end of the world."

"We're saying," she adds, "'We're going to practice making mistakes. We know, it's uncomfortable for you, and we also know that with practice, you can learn how tolerate it.'"

Parents have more ways to help their kids move beyond failure.

When Alicia discovered Sara's self-harming, she tried to set her up for success by enrolling her in a small, private school. She also got Sara into therapy and tried to give her the time and support to "figure things out," allowing her the chance to feel proud of herself when she did.

Alicia says Sara, now about to start her junior year, "just told me she's so glad she went there instead of one of the selective enrollments. At the time, it seemed to her like a huge failure to be rejected by those schools. But she's much happier now, no self-harming and displaying resiliency."

Learning to fail can be painful. But kids will only succeed if they can acquire the skill to handle whatever life throws their way.

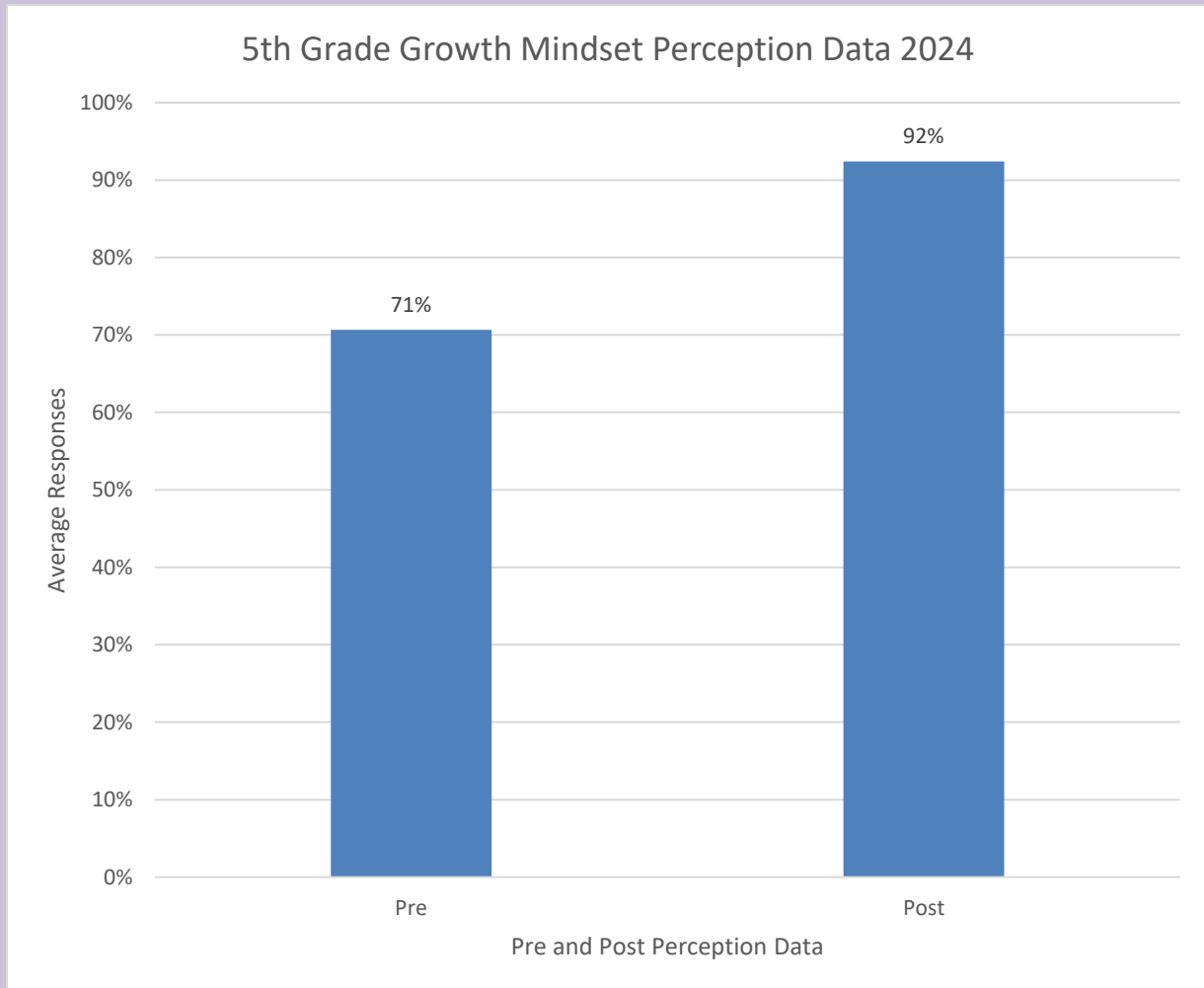
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## A Little Bit of Counseling Program Data



## March Core Curriculum Lessons

- Kindergarten - Resilience
- First - Resilience
- Second - Resilience
- Third - Resilience
- Fourth Resilience
- Fifth - Resilience