



EMBRACE THE STRUGGLE

By Melissa Ronan, Pelham Together

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Kids will inevitably struggle -- socially, academically, athletically, emotionally. How should we, as parents, deal with our children's struggles? We need to expect them, to accept them, and to adapt them into valuable lessons.

I was afraid to have children because I had struggled so much as a teenager and young adult that I couldn't bear the thought of watching my children go through those years. Dealing with undiagnosed depression from a young age, making (mostly bad) decisions about alcohol, the heartbreaks of dating, the loss of my mother as a 16-year old, the loneliness of going off to college – I had so many painful memories that were still relatively fresh in my mind when I got married at twenty-seven. But we forged ahead and had three children, and I was thankful for the early years of parenting when, as they say, we had “small children, small problems.” And then came the “big kids, big problems.” I wish I could say that I handled my three children's teenage years gracefully. But I didn't, although I got better as the years went along. My inevitable response to news of one of my kids being in trouble at school, or after finding out they had been drinking, or had been in a car accident, was to panic and project. To yell and threaten them. To assume I knew all the facts. To blame myself for being a bad parent, to imagine the different path this wrong turn was going to lead them down. These episodes damaged my relationships with my children, caused all of us additional turmoil, and weren't productive in addressing the problems.

And then I finally figured it out. Sh*t was going to happen, that's life with children, just like that's life in general. As parents, we can't prevent our kids from facing struggles. Well of course we could prevent some struggles, but we usually shouldn't. Preventing the struggles also prevents our child's growth. It prevents their skill development. It prevents them from maturing, from developing interpersonal skills, from taking responsibility, from becoming resourceful, from learning to fail gracefully. Allowing them to struggle and to fail may cause us discomfort, but the solution to that is for us to learn to tolerate our discomfort. Because if our children go out into the real world without learning to overcome challenges on their own, then they will truly struggle.

The best thing I could do was to actually expect the struggles, to not be shocked, to not react, to not lash out. The best thing I could do was to take deep breaths and to listen. To listen to the story from my child's point of view. To listen to the feelings that my child was dealing with in the moment. To listen a lot before I talked. And, after listening, the best way I could respond was by modeling acceptance of the situation and by showing love. This would give my child confidence to start moving forward.

How do you move forward with your child after a big setback? Not by figuring out how to solve your child's problem or make it go away. But by embracing the opportunity for your child to take responsibility and to tolerate the natural consequences of their actions. By helping them find support and resources and develop the skills to navigate their situation. By believing in their ability to endure and to heal and to grow. By watching proudly as they do indeed move forward, stronger and more mature for having struggled.