How and why to teach kids to be self-advocates

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OK, we get it: It's important to let our kids fail now so that they're not left dependent and helpless in college, to not swoop in and save them from a bad grade — or a tough teacher. We've seen the research and read the sound advice underscoring the anxiety-reducing effects of giving your kids more agency over their own lives.

But when your kid comes home from school venting about unfair assignments or teachers who "hate" them, how can we well-meaning parents defuse our own anxieties while still supporting our (precious! fragile! frustrated!) babies? How can we remain calm when we're afraid our kids aren't being heard or getting a fair shake?

It is important for kids to master the art of speaking up for themselves, and it can start as early as kindergarten. (Dreamstime)

"Teach your kids how to advocate for themselves," says Jessica Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. "Being able to face an adult when you're intimidated is one of the most important skills we can teach kids. To me, that ability speaks more highly for a kid's character than being coddled all the way into an Ivy League school."

In her book, the educator and mom of two aims to coax the helicoptering out of parenthood by showing us that our attempts to rescue our kids from discomfort are what prevent them from learning the skills to avoid those situations in the first place.

"Encourage your children to talk to their teachers — parents need to foster those opportunities in order for their kids to grow and learn," says Lahey, emphasizing the long-term benefits of parents taking a step back to allow their children to develop their voice. "You can role-play with your kid to help him get comfortable with the idea of talking to his teacher, write a script together, or even offer to stand outside the classroom when he talks to his teacher, but encourage him to start that conversation himself.

"I respect the ability of a student to come to me — not emotionally, not freaking out — far more than an email from a parent, especially if they consider the opposing perspective and figure out how to persuade me to their side. These are some of the most important things we can teach our children."

Mastering the art of speaking up for yourself can start as early as kindergarten, which often means setting kids up with self-advocacy training wheels. Fielding Winters, lower-school math co-ordinator at Norwood School in Bethesda, Md., and a mom of two boys, says that a little hand-holding in the early grades is a fine way to practise this skill.

"If your child is overwhelmed by the idea of approaching a teacher, try inviting that teacher into the situation. Explain that you're trying to teach your kid to self-advocate and ask if she'd encourage your kid to talk to her," Winters says. "Then that teacher not only becomes aware but also becomes an ally. You can even set up a conference where you're present, but encourage your child (to) speak on his own behalf." This advice also applies when a child feels misunderstood by a teacher or doesn't agree with the rules or their implementation.

Practising this in the early grades will ease your child's (and your) transition into middle school.

"Middle school is a good time for kids to take more responsibility for their

learning, both socially and academically," says Casey Robinson, principal of H-B Woodlawn secondary school in Arlington, Va. "Parents need to be involved, but more in terms of knowing what's going on with their children and helping them problem solve as opposed to being the primary problem solver."

Think of it as stepping into the role of coach or consultant, Robinson says: Offer support and advice, but let your kids be the ones to manage their own academic experience.

By high school, says Robinson, it's time for students to be the main drivers of their education.

"They're developmentally ready to do that. As a parent, you need to keep an open line of communication with your teen" — and tamping down your anxieties will go a long way toward doing that — "but you also need to ensure that they're prepared to manage their own social, emotional and academic issues," Robinson says.

"If they've been in situations where they've had to make decisions for themselves all along, they'll be better prepared to make smart calls about substance abuse, drinking or being a safe driver."

By the same token, she points out, if they've always been constrained and managed, they'll slip around those boundaries the first time they're given that opportunity.

When the stakes feel high, though — and we parents tend to view our kids' social interactions and academic performances through a magnifying glass — this is easier said than done. It's tough to fight the impulse to step in when we're afraid our kids are going to fall short on an assignment, or when a teacher is dismissing their efforts. Still, Robinson says, teachers would always rather hear from the student than the parent, even if it doesn't result in that student getting the

answer they're looking for.

In other words, says Robinson, it's far better for a student to face a missed deadline head-on by addressing it directly with the teacher than to avoid class for fear of the consequence. This can be hard (but important) for students — and their parents — to swallow.

"There's this need in our culture to avoid having your kid get a C. But guess what? If that happens — and they feel embarrassed about their grade or their lack of preparation — that's how kids learn to put the structures in place to prevent it from happening again," she says. "Those natural consequences help kids figure out that it feels good (to) show up for class prepared and understand what's happening."

The sign that a parent needs to get involved, says Winters, is when a problem your child is having at school impacts his ability to do his work and learn. "When a classroom struggle is causing undue anxiety at home and your kid's efforts to connect with the teacher haven't worked, it's time for the parent to approach the school."

She suggests finding a calm moment to email the teacher to request an in-person meeting or phone conversation.

"When you say 'This is my kid's perception of what happened — can you shed some light on what you're seeing in the classroom?', it honours the idea that the child's perspective is valid, but that it's just one point of view."

This opens the door for the teacher to receive feedback and respond in a nondefensive way.

"The way I look at it, I'm on the same team as my child's teachers, and we're both working for the good of the kid."

Winters also points out that kids' venting may also just be an outlet for their frustration rather than a plea for help.

"Try refraining from fixing their problems for them and ask your kids to come up with their own suggestions. You might say, 'So how are you going to deal with that?' There's value in letting your kids figure out how to work with a teacher or a situation that isn't always amazing and entertaining."

Robinson advises parents to step in when teachers aren't aware of circumstances at home — or if there are issues kids aren't able to discuss on their own.

"Working with the school to set your child up for success is a good thing," she says. "Where we fall down as parents is when we deprive them of opportunities to advocate for themselves in individual situations. And the best place to let your kid figure out how to deal with failure is in the safety of your care.

"Rather than seeing middle and high school as just a vehicle to get to college, they should be learning experiences in and of themselves. Learning how to self-advocate, how to grow your self-confidence, take responsibility for your mistakes and correct them moving forward — it's a lot harder to teach those things in college."