

Preface

Background

An ancient Japanese proverb states “Fall down seven times, get up eight.” In March, 2011, northern Japan was hit by a magnitude 9 earthquake, the largest in their recorded history. Parts of Japan were literally destroyed. Hundreds of thousands were killed or maimed. With limited resources and scarcity of basic supplies, the Japanese people immediately stood together and began to rebuild. They were true to their proverb. This kind of demonstrated resilience is something desirable for all people. Adults want it for our children. But could we expect our country’s younger generation to roll up their sleeves and face adversity with such tenacity? Or could we expect our children to demand that somebody else come and fix things for them?

Purpose

I can think of few life lessons as important to success as the beautiful metaphor “Fall down seven times, get up eight.” Teachers and parents who want students to learn to be resilient, joyful, enduring learners must find a way to inspire self-motivation in students that will empower them to deal with whatever they encounter in life. Rather than trying to shield them from adversity and challenge, it is the job of adult advocates to push learners to the far reaches of their abilities and

equip them with the tools they need to pursue goals through even the most difficult circumstances.

When giving presentations, I speak about the consensus of various cognitive and behavioral theorists who believe much of what adults do is counterproductive to the outcomes we really want for our children. We have given trophies to players who just show up, and we told our children they are *the best* when they clearly are not. We have led them to believe they have a right to be comfortable, to be untroubled, and to be constantly entertained. In an effort to ensure they feel good about themselves, we applaud, we excuse, we rationalize, and, when needed, we intervene on their behalf. And I ask this question, “How has that worked out so far?”

To audiences I explain my evolution from being a teacher who used abundant rewards, incentives, and praise to someone who has had to reconsider many of the well-meaning things I said and did to children, both my hundreds of students and my own children (three sons and two stepsons).

Invariably, at the end of presentations, audience members will seek me out to ask specifically about things they are doing with their students and/or offspring.

“Seriously, our child really is extremely bright. We all tell her how smart she is all the time because we want her to live up to her full potential. How can that be the wrong thing to do?”

“We told my son that if he will stick with his hockey lessons, we will let him get a new Xbox game. Was that bad?”

“In our district there is a big emphasis on differentiated instruction. I like what you are saying about the zone of proximal development, attribution theory, and mindsets. My goal is to give all my students an equal education. So which way is best?”

“Are you telling us that basically anyone can be anything they want if they just try hard enough? Is that what I tell my son?”

“We were told that our daughter’s IQ is just below normal. We’re not sure what that means, and we are worried that she won’t be able to keep up in school. How do we keep her from giving up when she’s up against such overwhelming odds?”

“At our school, we use a schoolwide reward system to encourage kids to read. I’ve never been comfortable with it, but most of the other teachers think it’s a great idea. What do the experts say about that?”

“I teach high school. I have a student who is convinced that he cannot do the work in my class. He won’t even try. He totally withdraws when I try to encourage him. I know for a fact he could do it, if he wanted to. Do you think he’s just faking incompetence for some reason, or is there a possibility he really doesn’t know how capable he is?”

“I’ve told my students that failure is not an option. I won’t accept failures in my class. What’s wrong with that?”

(My answers are in Chapter 10.)

Rationale

It finally occurred to me that what most parents and educators long for is a guide with specific strategies about how to help children become independent, successful learners. We need to understand the rationale of theory, but we also seek direction on how to foster autonomous, persistent visionaries rather than dependent, helpless victims. We want concrete examples about how to best change a generation of children who think they are entitled to a better life into a generation of children who are better able to make that life happen for themselves.

Most of the teachers and parents I know have a basic knowledge of motivational theory either from their experience or from their academic pursuits. There is a wealth of material

written on the subject. The purpose of *Fall Down 7 Times, Get Up 8* is to synthesize the thinking of major motivational theorists into a framework of what to say and what not to say to children and why. My intent is to provide specific, applicable solutions to common encounters of adults who work with kids.

The suggested strategies are not always easy (some go against what we've been doing for years), but they are feasible and get easier with practice. We adults must act as meaningful role models who regularly articulate and demonstrate the value of personal responsibility, dedication, persistence, and resilience. We must be encouraging but honest with our charges; we must give them effective feedback that avoids labels (both positive and negative). We must judge less and guide more.

We have to teach our children they have power over their lives, and through their efforts and their choices, they can affect change in their circumstances and in their destinies. We can no longer perpetuate the myth "You can be anything in the world you want to be," but we must constantly remind them that through purposeful practice they can get better at anything they choose. We have to show them every day that effort and choices are things they can control, and in fact, they are the keys to a successful life.

Invitation to the Reader

I have worked in the field of education for more than 40 years. I am a teacher, a parent, a stepparent, a professor, an educational consultant, an author, and a grandmother. I work throughout this country and abroad on many issues dealing with motivation for both adults and children. I think the keys to successful schooling are inherently connected to how well we prepare our students to become self-sufficient, resourceful lifelong learners.

The concepts I present are not original; I have learned from experts in the fields of behavioral and cognitive psychology, from thoughtful theorists, and from countless teachers and students along the way. My ideas are not always politically correct.

They do not excuse any ethnicity, socioeconomic group, faith, culture, community, or family from being unable to empower its offspring. At this point I am not concerned as much with “why we are this way or that way” as I am about how we can make things better for every learner. This is a handbook for adult advocates who want to help kids become self-motivated lifelong learners rather than dependent short-term thinkers who think the world owes them a free ride.

I want to assure you that I did not initially embrace some of the concepts I present in this book, nor did I accept all of them with equal ease. These are the best practices I know *for now*. Some ideas may seem counterintuitive and others appear to be downright blasphemous to our educational system as it is now. But I know that even small steps can make a big difference in the ways we encourage children. I am continuing my growth as an advocate for children, and I invite you to join this journey as you see fit.