

Helping Children to Learn and Grow from Setback and Failure

By Jordan Sim, School Psychologist

Watching a student struggle with a challenging activity is tough for adults. Yet, frustration and failure are necessary components of mastery. Mastery is the experience of overcoming obstacles to reach a goal. It's using one's skills to negotiate a situation, overcome a hurdle, solve a problem. Mastery is the foundation of self-efficacy; the "I can do it" attitude that is critical for a child's self-confidence and resilience.

A challenge for adults is how to promote what is called by psychologist, Dr. Karen Reivich, "Positive Frustration". The goal of Positive Frustration is to convey to students that frustration and failure are components of success and pride. Some successes are easy, reached with little effort or struggle. Many successes, however, result from previous setback and failure along the way which means they require persistence even when feeling frustrated with ourselves or the situation. Think about these questions: What do I say/do when your someone is becoming frustrated by a task? What messages do I send?

Here are some common things adults say when they see a student become frustrated and the message it unintentionally sends to the student:

- "It's nothing to get upset about." (Message: You shouldn't feel frustrated when something is hard. Frustration is bad.)
- "Maybe that's too hard for you. Why don't you try this one instead." (Message: If something is hard, give up and find something easy to do.)
- "Here, let me do it." (Message: You can't succeed on your own.)
- "If you can't play with it without getting upset, then maybe you should do something else." (Message: At the first sign of frustration, quit and move on.)

It should be underscored that adults usually say these things because we don't like seeing someone frustrated. Their frustration makes us feel uncomfortable, helpless — and to get rid of these feelings we jump in and rescue them. So, an important way to help develop the student's comfort with frustration is to first develop your comfort with seeing them frustrated. You can do this by paying attention to what you say to yourself when you see someone frustrated and then exploring the accuracy of those beliefs. For example, if you say to yourself, "She's going to be too upset. I'll never get her calmed down," ask yourself "Has she ever not calmed down before? It might take a while but she will eventually calm down. Frustration never lasts forever."

(OVER)

The “right” amount of frustration is important to consider when practising Positive Frustration. If it’s too much, the student feels overwhelmed and helpless. If it’s the right amount, the student learns how to manage it and develop skills. For example, at age 3, learning cursive handwriting is too challenging a task. So helping a student makes sense. Whereas, at age 8, the student probably has the motor skills to learn cursive handwriting.

It's also important to play to the student's strengths. If the student has strong fine motor skills, feeling frustrated while putting together a puzzle can be a positive experience. If, instead, the student's large motor skills are more advanced, create challenges that require using the larger muscles of his body, like creating a challenging obstacle course. In addition, what the student enjoys matters too. Frustration during an activity that s/he enjoys will build their ability to persist more than frustration that comes during an activity that is not as pleasurable.

How to Intervene with Frustration in a Positive Way

Sometimes we do need to intervene and help students when they are feeling frustrated. When you do this, you can make the frustration a learning experience by helping the student to develop their awareness and learn strategies for keeping their frustration at reasonable levels. You are also helping him/her to figure out what strategies can be used to persist on their quest despite the frustration.

Start by asking the student to share with you how s/he feels when frustrated and let them know that frustration is normal and that everyone feels it sometimes. You can share stories of times you felt frustrated and tell them that frustration is a sign of the need to remain calm and to think of it as a challenge – these are good things!

Next, help the student learn how to keep frustration from getting so intense that s/he is unable to keep focused on the task or challenge. You can use breathing exercises like taking 5 slow deep breaths to help calm down. Or you can also suggest taking a 2 minute break, but don't forget to go back. Breaks are helpful and are a valuable coping strategy, but if you don't return to the task you are instead reinforcing giving up.

Finally, help the student to figure out a different strategy to use to meet the goal of the situation. Often frustration comes when we are continuing to use the same strategy despite the fact that it's not working. If the student is trying to do a puzzle and keeps forcing the piece into the spot without turning it, ask him/her "can you think of a way to turn that piece so that it might fit better?" Focusing on strategies helps build self-confidence and increases the chances that your student will overcome the obstacle and reach their goal.