

By Bette-Jane Raphael

Is it ever wise  
to let your  
children fail?

## Truth and Consequences

**T**he afternoon my third-grader realized that she'd left her homework sheet in her classroom cubby and wouldn't be able to complete her assignment for the following day, she pleaded with me to take her back to school to retrieve it. "If I don't hand it in tomorrow, Mr. Reed will give me an X," she told me tearfully. "And if I get two Xs, I'll have to sit on the side of the playground while all the other kids are playing. It's really embarrassing!" She looked so miserable, I couldn't resist doing what she asked. And anyway, I thought, embarrassing eight-year-old little girls at a stage in their young lives when they're already embarrassed by practically everything seemed like cruel and unusual punishment.

But a week later, when she left her spelling list at school and couldn't study for the next day's test, it occurred to me that rescuing her from her self-made predicaments might do her more harm than good. If she knew I'd always be there to save her, she might never learn that consequences follow actions, and that even if we don't like those consequences, we still have to abide by them. She might never learn that we can't just wriggle free of responsibility for our own behavior, or rely on someone else to bail us out of the problems it may cause. Granted, her only crime was carelessness, but I had the feeling that easy lessons learned early might forestall the need for harder ones later on.

This belief was reinforced soon afterward by two newspaper accounts of youngsters who had forgotten a lot more than their spelling lists. The first story concerned four middle school boys who'd broken into and vandalized their upscale private academy. When they were subsequently expelled, their outraged parents sued the school. The second story told of 28 high school students who had

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been caught plagiarizing on their biology term papers. All 28 were given zeroes in the course. Their irate parents then complained to the school board, which ordered the teacher to raise the students' grades. When she wouldn't do it, the board did.

As I read these stories, I found myself identifying with the anguish of the parents involved, and empathizing with their need to snatch their offspring from the jaws of punishments that would, if not ruin their lives, at least cause them pretty heavy setbacks on the road to college. But I also realized that as these adults rushed furiously to the defense of

their teenagers, they were teaching them very different lessons from the one I had tried to teach my daughter the day I decided not to take her back to school for her spelling list. By their ac-

tions, these parents were in effect saying: "If you do something wrong, don't worry. We'll make sure you don't have to accept the consequences." I think that's a bad lesson for children, and a bad thing for society at large.

Because we parents are in the business of raising responsible, law-abiding citizens, grown-ups who can play by the rules and succeed by them. And when these parents acted to overturn the punishments meted out to their children, they were behaving as if the rules didn't matter.

The parents of the middle schoolers labeled their children's behavior "stupid," while the parents of the high school students termed their teenagers' wholesale plagiarism "a mistake." But trivializing their bad behavior does not help these young people, who are still forming principles to live by. On the contrary, it gives them permission to see their bad behavior as no big deal, when actually it is.

It's a big deal because when people don't play by the rules—when they think it's O.K. to break faith with, steal from, or do damage to others—everybody suffers. As we all did when it became known that Enron and other companies' executives, for their own enrichment, had made it standard operating procedure to bilk their employees and investors of millions and millions of dollars. Their victims lost money and security, but all of us lost something—namely our trust in the probity of our business leaders and the soundness of our economy. Failures of faith such as this wound our society in incalculable ways.

No doubt, it's hard to bear seeing our children make life-altering mistakes that can derail them from the smooth trajectory of their lives. But keeping kids from learning lessons of accountability and courage may, in the final analysis, be even harder, for them and for all of us.

Which is why I allowed my eight-year-old to fail her spelling test. Better that, I thought, than letting her fail at life. **FC**