

When Helping Hurts



It's never easy seeing a student experience distress, but well-meaning adults (myself included) too quickly and too often rush to the rescue. There are times to intervene, but we must be more judicious in knowing when to let students cope with failure on their own. Otherwise, we will raise a risk-averse generation whose members lack resilience and the crucial ability to rebound from failure. To prevent that outcome, teachers and educational leaders alike must be mindful of several situations where helping hurts.

Extrinsic Motivators

As a teacher, few things pain me more than when adults offer students rewards for performing well in school. I want students to learn merely for the sake of learning, which includes the healthy sense of fulfillment that comes with acquiring skills and knowledge. When adults incentivize learning and performance with promises of new video games, clothes, and cars, they condition students to expect something extra in return for every achievement. Going to school eventually morphs into an undesirable chore -- rather than a gift -- for which students demand a form of payment.

My sentiments are reinforced by Jessica Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. She recently addressed parents at my school:

[Jessica Lahey](#) from [David Cutler](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Much of this goes hand in hand with parents' caring more about the grade than what the student actually learned. With college becoming increasingly expensive and competitive, I understand this skewed priority, as much as it frustrates me. To get to that next level, a growing number of students are focusing on the grade first, rather than growth and maturity, which should be paramount.

Too Much Tutoring

Some students clearly do need tutors to help reinforce their learning. Throughout middle school, I went to a math tutor who, in addition to making the material more comprehensible, also made it more enjoyable. Still, I fear that some students receive too much assistance from tutors and meet with them too often. For those reasons, I know of several teachers who don't assign large take-home writing and research assignments -- it's too difficult to ascertain how much of the work is the students' and how much belongs to a tutor. Instead, those teachers assign more in-class essays to assess mastery. While I understand their motivation for doing so, I can't help but feel that the tactic leaves students worse off. I favor a balance of the two, with the in-class work providing a baseline for how a student is likely to write at home, without assistance.

As much as it pains adults to see some students struggle, often the best thing we can do for them is nothing at all. Otherwise, they will constantly rely on support in college and in the workplace, where a lack of confidence and self-reliance might hinder success.

Deadline Extensions

Certainly circumstances do exist that make granting extensions wholly valid, like when students must cope with the death of a loved one or confront a serious medical issue. I'm also likely to grant an extension request, for most reasons, that is made in advance of the due date -- three days at minimum. All the while, I struggle with knowing that by making such decisions, I am often creating even more pressure. The student must not only meet her new deadline, but also complete new work that I and other teachers continue to assign. If the same person also receives an extension in other classes, the workload will quickly pile up, making recovery and success an unlikely scenario.

Eliminating Stress and Anxiety

No adult wants to see any young person paralyzed by stress and anxiety. Those are powerful emotions, which if unchecked can sometimes lead to an array of larger health issues. However, at times I fear that adults (again, myself included) are overly eager to mitigate unease rather than let students rise above their own self-doubt. Those mitigations could include mandating academic support, or granting exceptions and extensions of any kind. The young person is then reinforced with the unhealthy notion that he can't resolve any of his own challenges, and that he must always seek support to make life less stressful and more enjoyable. Unfortunately, the world at large is neither as compassionate nor understanding, and we must be cautious about demonizing stress and anxiety -- which, in healthy amounts, assist not only with productivity, but also with the larger learning process.

Over Scheduling

In our era of renewed emphasis on AP classes, extracurricular activities, after-school sports, and community service, it's no wonder that many students feel stressed and anxious. I'm amazed at how much adults ask young people to balance, while still expecting them to maintain something of a social life. With so much being forced onto their plates, students still see not being able to do everything equally well as a sign of weakness rather than the reality of being human. A crammed student schedule may appear attractive to college admissions officers (if the candidate can avoid burnout), but it doesn't help with learning about sacrificing to pursue one interest or prioritize it over another. We can't do everything, and life is all about making choices. Unfortunately, too many students are deprived of the opportunity to learn that lesson.

In your experience, how else does trying to help students sometimes hurt them in the long run? Please share your thoughts and experiences in the comments section below.