



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Is it Monday Yet? 10/31/24



Helping our Children to get Comfortable being Uncomfortable

Encouraging our young Explorers to “put themselves out there” provides them with the tools to succeed in school and beyond, building resilience, self-confidence, and curiosity. Programs like athletics, theater, running for Student Council, speaking in front of a whole school assembly, or taking a chance to raise one’s hand with an answer to a tricky question, are all opportunities for students to put themselves out there.

During these formative years, our students benefit significantly from learning to try new things, learning to be careful and thoughtful when engaging in something that seems risky, and learning how to gracefully embrace both success and setbacks. This approach prepares them to handle life’s opportunities and is one of many skills to set a strong foundation for adulthood... although it may not seem that way to them now.

When I was a child growing up in Brooklyn, it seemed as though my parents needed to return something to the grocery store at least once a week, and when I say “my parents,” I mean “me,” because bringing these items back to the grocer was one of my chores (it was this, or make a daily knock on the door of the very elderly lady, Mrs. Sponn, who lived across the street, to make sure she was still “with us,” as my mom said (and she always was... and might still be), which inevitably led to a three hour tour (to quote the theme song from my then favorite TV show) of her Hummel collection.

The most frequent returns were gallons of sour milk and moldy loaves of bread that required my top performance in the areas of debate, civil discourse, and logical reasoning to disabuse the customer service person of their misunderstanding of “use

by” and “sell by,” and on those occasions when there was a reimbursement in the cards, my Dad split it with me! Then there were the one-off straight up exchange items, such as a jar of peanut butter that someone had opened, written something offensive in with their finger, and put back on the shelf (back in the days before everything was triple safety sealed), or a box of Corn Flakes that was actually a box of Froot Loops (my brothers and I thought we hit the jackpot, but it was not to be... there is probably not a huge Corn Flakes/Froot Loops crossover market). My father told me to think of it as an afterschool activity, which I’d be alerted to by finding the item in a bag from the store, to which the receipt was attached, along with a note of instructions to me, on the desk in my room.

I HATED having to do this, which I am sure I made clear to my parents in one way or another. In response to my kvetching, my Dad had three pretty staple responses: “you know, Chris, sometimes you just have to do things you don’t want to do,” or “just eat the frog first thing in the morning and get it over with” or “... put yourself out there, it’ll build character,” and although it was tough for me to understand how returning stale potato chips to the grocery store would lead to acquiring a life skill, as it turns out, he was probably right!

One of the most significant benefits of encouraging our children to “put themselves out there” is the development of self-confidence. Young students often grapple with uncertainty, self-doubt, and insecurities as they navigate social and academic environments. By encouraging them to try new activities at this age, to participate in class discussions, join clubs, have difficult conversations with grocery store clerks, or try out for a coveted spot on a team or in a cast, we help them build confidence in their abilities and recognize their potential, in an environment in which it is relatively safe to take such risks. After all, this is the definition of what it means to be an Explorer, and what better place to try, fall off the horse and get back on, than at Ashbrook!!

Even small achievements, like contributing an idea in class or trying something they have never done before, reinforce the idea that our kids are capable and resourceful. As with any muscle, the muscle of self-assurance grows when exercised, making it easier for our kids to step outside their comfort zones in the future.

When I talk to the Gores about our campus and how it was designed, Dave often mentions how important the theater was in his vision for a school that would hope to provide a transformative student experience. At Ashbrook, the theater is not only the actual center of campus, but it is also at a programmatic center as well, because it’s a place where students can pretend, try on different identities, or take a risk as a speaker, member of a cast, part of an ensemble, or behind the scenes in the tech crew.

This idea of taking risks beyond one's comfort zone, the Gores felt, was essential for growth, and the theater was the perfect place for this to play out (pun intended), enacting the idea most famously referenced by the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who is credited with the saying, "that which does not kill me, makes me stronger." This idea, of course, is often referenced in many other contexts and is one our students are likely already familiar with because it has inspired [more than 30 contemporary musicians](#), many our kids listen to, who reference the Nihilist in songs they have most likely heard. Little did I know how ahead of their time my parents were, or (in paraphrase) how enlightened my drill instructor in boot camp was when he "invited" a group of young GIs to think about pain as weakness leaving the body! When any of us try new things, we will invariably encounter challenges. Whether it's participating in a competition we don't win or receiving initial feedback on a project, these experiences help us build resilience.

As parents and teachers, we can provide great models for embracing opportunities to try new things, by talking aloud about how it feels as we are doing so, sometimes succeeding but more often stumbling a bit before succeeding, but never giving up. This is a highly effective way to help our children understand how failing is not a bad thing (as opposed to quitting altogether and giving up), and that a healthy perspective on failure is to think about it as a step towards succeeding, as captured in the phrase, "failing forward." Learning to manage disappointment and to view it as an opportunity for growth and a chance to try again, is one of the most valuable lessons a child can learn.

Developing this sort of resilience early on helps students handle bigger challenges later in life, equipping them with an adaptable, growth mindset, the belief that intelligence and abilities can develop with effort and perseverance and are not innate. How sad it is when I encounter someone, as an adult, who has never failed, or who has avoided challenging themselves because they were afraid of failure, and has no idea HOW to recover from a now higher stakes failure. In this context, maybe one of the most important pieces of advice my parents gave me while growing up, other than don't let the grocer see you blink, was the very counterintuitive caution against celebrating the meeting of 100% of the goals I set for myself: to their thinking this was more likely a moment to think about maybe putting myself out there a bit further than I was. To inspire this sort of reflection, they would often ask me what I would choose to do if I were guaranteed not to fail.

In this respect, when parents ask me about the educational value of athletics teams or theater or band programs, or even academic competitions, I often talk about how

children can learn lessons “on a field of play,” about putting themselves out there, that cannot be learned in any other way. In these settings, as in others, setbacks our children encounter and recover from, strengthen their problem-solving skills and their determination to keep trying new things. To put it another way, an assistant coach I used to work with would often remind our young lacrosse players, during the pre-game locker room gameface speech, that they were going to win... or they were going learn, and even in the latter case, they would be way ahead of those who chose not to play at all.

Putting oneself out there often involves interacting with new people and building social connections. Whether it’s joining a sports team, participating in school clubs, or collaborating on group projects, these experiences foster stronger social skills. Students learn how to work with others, communicate effectively, and navigate different personalities and perspectives. They also discover how to cooperate and support one another, skills essential for any collaborative environment. These friendships and connections foster a sense of belonging and can offer students a support system, making their school experience more enjoyable and enriching.

This perspective is essential for students’ long-term success. When students realize that growth comes from pushing their limits and learning from mistakes, they’re more likely to view obstacles as steps. With this mindset, they understand that their potential is not fixed but something they can nurture and expand through effort, curiosity, and persistence. This sort of exploration allows our children to discover what they’re truly passionate about.

By trying a variety of activities, whether in academics, sports, or the arts, our children gain insights into what excites them. Fast forwarding a bit, how sad would it be to live a full life having never encountered that activity, cause, or profession that we would’ve rocked more than any other? In this way, putting oneself out there can provide direction as our children advance in school, helping them select courses, extracurriculars, and later, even career paths that align with their interests, and maybe even life partners.

Early exposure to diverse experiences enables our children to develop a clearer understanding of themselves and feel more engaged in their learning, and what better way to explore these diverse experiences than putting oneself out there at Ashbrook? Ultimately, encouraging our children to “put themselves out there” empowers them. These efforts enrich their school experience and instill skills that serve them well throughout life. By helping our young Explorers step outside their comfort zones, into the zone where the magic happens, or what educators call the “zone of proximal

development” (coined by Lev Vygotsky), we help them realize their potential, discover their strengths, and embrace the world with a sense of curiosity and courage.