



Risk-taking and risk-making: Understanding when less than perfection is more than acceptable

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Remember the last time you ventured out in a totally new direction, unencumbered by anyone's expectations but your own; an individual goal focused on learning or becoming something (or someone) new? Usually, whether you succeeded to your satisfaction or not, you probably gave yourself a pat on the back for even putting forth effort. Conversely, do you recall a time when someone else—a teacher, a parent, a spouse—prodded you to try something that you might not have attempted without their external urging? What happened when you succeeded...failed? Who was the first person you thought might be pleased...disappointed?

I raise these questions because they point out a distinction that is too-seldom appreciated when we are trying to help our gifted children accept new challenges—the difference between risk-taking and risk-making. In risk-taking, someone is often pushing you to accept a risk ("Wouldn't you like to learn to ski so that you can join the rest of us on winter weekends?") that was not on your personal agenda; in risk-making, you are the person doing the pulling ("Gee, I'd really love to learn how to ski!"). The dynamics of risk-taking vs. risk-making, pushing vs. pulling, is worth considering, especially with easy-to-criticize-themselves children who are highly gifted and used to (addicted to?) success.

Here is what I have learned, both in my career as an educator and my role as a dad, when it comes to understanding the dynamics of risks:

- Someone needs to explain to children the distinctions between risk taking and making, asking them to recall situations where one of the two was more in evidence. Then, you can begin a discussion of the "comfort level" one feels in each situation.
- Some people find it easy to make (or take) a risk in an area of relative comfort. For gifted children, this is often an academic area or intellectual skill. Yet when it comes to physical tasks (like trying out for the soccer team), social tasks (going to a sleepover where you only know one other kid), or emotional risks (telling someone your true feelings about them or an incident that affected you), the level of anxiety may be heightened, especially if the risk is imposed from someone else.
- Adults talk a good game about the benefit of taking risks, yet how well do they model this behavior? For example, how often do you take on a challenge in an area where you have no expertise or little obvious interest? If the answer is "not very often", consider the message this inactivity might be sending to your child.
- Highly gifted children may tend to focus on what they can already do well because their only standard of acceptability is perfection. To some gifted children, a "B" is tantamount to failure, which limits your risk taking/making behavior to the ol' stand bys: areas in which you have excelled in the past.
- Risk-taking (the one that is accompanied by external prodding) is often more acceptable for younger children than older ones, and may, in fact, be a good way to teach your child early that perfection is not the goal of a new activity...fun and learning are the primary goals.
- The best people to convince gifted children that perfection isn't all it's cracked up to be may not be parents (or, for that matter, any adult). Instead, think of using the advice and "peer wisdom" of a child who is two-four years older than your child. This "near peer" usually has more credibility than does an adult who, from the child's view, went to school while the Earth was still cooling. So...bring in the reinforcements: near peers can entice children to take and make risks in productive and meaningful ways.
- As a parent, you do know your child very well—better than your child may think. Therefore, there are times when it is within your parental purview to make a suggestion to your child that you think s/he will like once they get into it. The best way to convince your son or daughter, though, is to offer them an out. Piano lessons? Fine...as long as the child can quit in six months if it's just not enjoyable. Same for ice skating. Same with advanced math. No adult I know makes a long-term contract with the unknown...why should your child?

These are just some tips to help acclimate your child to the idea that life is not perfect, and neither are they, yet the sun still rises every new day. Risk-taking and risk-making, and understanding the distinctions between them, might go a long way toward enriching your gifted children's lives—from both their vantage and yours.