

# **The Quitting Response: When Bad Thinking Causes Good Kids to Give Up**

*by Dr. Donna Riter*

Failure, for most people, is like a kick in the shins, it gets your attention, hurts when it happens and then after a few minutes the hurt goes away. But what happens when the failure, like the sore shin, continues to be problematic. What prompts some kids when they are knocked down by failure to get up, brush themselves off and begin again with a new determination to succeed, while others give up? How is it that some students see failure as a learning experience and a breeding ground for creative alternatives and approaches, while others see it as a way of life from which there are no opportunities and no chance for escape?

Take Michael, for example, who was asked by me to cut out similar strips of paper to be part of a paper quilt we were weaving. I watched his scissors refuse to open and close without a two handed death grip (he used the pages of our large dictionary to steady his paper since both of his hands were busy). I saw him cut 10 strips of white paper and then realized he was supposed to be using the red paper (he asked to borrow my markers and then colored the white strips red). Finally, as we were cleaning up, Michael realized, to the delight of all his classmates, that he had stapled himself (via his shirt sleeve) to the quilt backing while diligently working on the project.

Through it all, Michael never gave up on his effort to complete his part of the project. He never seemed to doubt his ability to succeed. I took Michael aside for a moment at the end of the class to compliment him on his persistence and originality for successfully working out the problems that had occurred. Michael's face suddenly became more serious as he cocked his head and said, "What problems?" There it was, FAILURE staring him right in the face and he missed it! Not that I wanted Michael to fold under the pressures of negative events (several other students in my classroom would have crumbled and given up somewhere between the malfunctioning scissors and the crossed colors catastrophe). But didn't he at least have to recognize failures so he could then measure his success? Watching Michael handle himself on a day to day basis seemed to support the fact that this was not the case. Michael was an average student who I suddenly realized had an incredible edge over several of his classmates. He had a skill that allowed him to translate potential failures into nothing more than ongoing "growth opportunities." He had acquired, somewhere in his life, what Dr. Martin Seligman refers to as "Learned Optimism." (Seligman, 1991) He was convinced that he had control over events that happened and that his actions made a difference.

Jacob was also an average student in this same class but for him, failure was a daily gremlin with an attitude. Things always seemed to go wrong in a series for him. His books would fall off the desk, he would lose the page right before it was his turn to read, his pencil point would break in the middle of the spelling quiz, he would realize too late that his permission slip that was due this morning was no longer in the envelope his mother had given him, and he would often be the last

one chosen to be on a team as his classmates whispered about how much he would hamper their changes for victory. Despite many interventions and words of encouragement, Jacob became very passive and convinced that nothing he did made any difference. He was very accomplished at what Dr. Seligman refers to as “learned helplessness” or as I prefer to call it, “the black cloud syndrome.” Jacob believed that if anything did go well for him it was because ‘it was always the way things went for him, he shouldn’t expect anything better, he didn’t deserve anything better and that if things were going well to begin with it wasn’t going to last.’ Giving up had become an acceptable solution for Jacob in the four short years he’d been in school. I could almost picture Jacob neatly rationalizing that: ‘If there is no chance that I will be successful because the deck is already stacked against me (the black cloud is always hanging over my head) then when the failure strikes it won’t take me by surprise; I expect it and anyhow, it’s out of my control.’

I began questioning how I could have two students who started out in the same school together, had been in the same classrooms, with the same teachers, and under the same expectations, but had managed to learn and process two very different approaches to dealing with failure in school. (Although Jacob was less independent than Michael around his family, both students had good family interactions and support). Michael was a student who seemed to be able to see the best side of every setback; oozing with self-confidence which his classmates recognized and responded very positively toward. Jacob on the other hand, saw every setback as a catastrophic and momentarily paralyzing situation. He lacked self-confidence and as a result, was often the brunt of other student’s acknowledgement of his proclaimed incompetence and “bad luck.”

### **Where Does it Come From?**

Over the year, as I watched the two boys, I noticed that even though they had similar talents and abilities, Michael rarely needed encouragement to tackle a new assignment or responsibility, but Jacob, even when he did well, saw himself as not living up to expectations. When Jacob finished a project or task which earned praise and acknowledgement (i.e. when he won the spelling contest) he was convinced his victory was only the result of good luck. (“It’s a good thing Terry wasn’t here or I’d have lost for sure” was the response to my congratulations for his successful efforts). Jacob was never able to see his successes as the direct result of his knowledge or efforts but always the by-product of uncontrollable circumstances (he won the spelling contest because Terry was home sick, not because he knew the material).

FOR JACOB,  
FAILURE WAS A  
DAILY GREMLIN  
WITH AN  
ATTITUDE

Jacob’s irrational belief system (“I have no control over my life so nothing I do matters”) fueled the conclusion of helplessness. It was easy for Jacob to take part in an activity, have something go wrong and then say, “See, nothing I do ever works out right anyway”. His response to situations became very predictable based on his belief systems. It was these same belief systems that allowed Jacob the gateway to giving up, often before he got started.

## **Tipping the Downside up (How to Make a Change in the Classroom)**

Both adults and children have common belief systems that they rely on as a basis for how they will react to people and situations. These belief systems are created and reinforced over the years by personal experiences, outside reactions and self-evaluation. To understand Jacob's motivations for his responses, I had to recognize his long standing, irrational belief systems and acknowledge that I couldn't get rid of the old belief systems without providing new and rational belief systems to replace them.

What I realized was that the irrational belief system that interfered most with Jacob's success was his feeling of having absolutely no control over his life. Even though there were many choices of response built into every situation, Jacob never realized he had any options regarding feelings or his reactions. For example, when things did not work out the way he planned, he would: 1.) deny that there was a good reason for the problem (Jacob usually saw his "bad luck" as the cause of the problem), or 2.) act out his feelings (as he sometimes did my sulking or becoming angry with the activity or his classmates). He never recognized the fact that there was a third approach; accept the mistake for just that (a mistake), express the anger, disappointment, embarrassment etc. and then look for an appropriate solution. Michael, on the other hand, not only already knew all this, but had been applying his knowledge successfully for years. Jacob, unfortunately was clueless to any alternatives to his safe pattern of just giving up.

My question became, how do I teach someone like Jacob, who has an irrational, pessimistic outlook on everything he attempts, to be more rational and optimistic. Like Michael? I decided I needed to determine what Jacob's explanatory style really was (how he translated most events in his world). In Jacob's case it was easy to see that his self-talk consisted of put downs, harsh criticism and personal attacks (i.e. "I only won the spelling contest because Terry wasn't in school"). The personal attack broken record could sound like this for Jacob, 'I don't deserve to win, I'm not even a good speller. Even the teacher knows I would have lost if Terry had been here. Everyone would rather have a smart kid like Terry win then some stupid kid like me. Heck, even though I won this time, I'll never be able to do it again.' This kind of adverse self talk set the stage for Jacob's frustration and failure. Jacob could easily argue with peers or even with an adult when he disagreed with another's ideas or requests but he was unable to argue himself out of those destructive, self-defeating comments.

## **Turning the Table**

To make it clearer for myself, I decided to break Jacob's thinking down into 4 areas: The Project (event), Ideas (first thoughts), Improvement (change to, refashion, modify), and Keeping that Thought (bond, stick to, hold onto the new thought). This gave me a chance to use an activity to attempt to model for Jacob what I would like him to try.

## Where to Begin?

I sat down next to Jacob one afternoon during our art class and started working on an art project just like the one that each student in the room had in front of them (popsicle stick bird houses). As I collected all of my materials, just as Ms. Jones the art teacher had instructed the students to do. I began writing down the number of steps I would need to follow and a brief one word explanation of each one (i.e. 1.) take 120 sticks from bag, 2.) get glue, 3.) get cardboard base (back of box), 4.) draw model etc.) Jacob asked me why I was writing the information down. I explained to him that when I'm concentrating on doing something, I can sometimes get confused about the order I should follow unless I have it in front of me. If I mess up the order I could mess up the project. Since Ms. Jones had given only verbal directions, I thought I'd better write them out so I could look at them as I went along. He gave me a quizzical look and asked, "You forgot things?" "Why yes." I said smiling. "Sometimes even teachers forget things." "I didn't know that about teachers." He responded with a smile.

As we moved along with our projects, I used self-talk to lead myself through the project and reinforce myself with I did well or when I made a mistake (breaking a stick too short, putting on too much glue, etc.). Jacob watched me carefully and each time I would make an error, I would say out loud to myself (self-talk), "That was a foolish thing to do but I'm smart so how can I fix this? Do I need to ask for help or can I figure out the problem on my own?" Then I would make the decision. Each day for the next several art classes, I followed the exact approach that I had started on the first day. When my project was finally finished, I held it up and exclaimed that it would make a very good home for some lucky birds. Then I asked Jacob what he thought of my birdhouse. "It's perfect, it doesn't look just like Ms. Jones' house" he said, "You made lots of mistakes because I heard you say so." "That's true Jacob," I did have some problems but I figured out a way to fix the problems as they came up and I was able to get this birdhouse together, with one opening, a perch and painted the color of my choice (as the directions had called for). I think I made some good choices on how to handle the problems and I am pleased with my effort and with how my project looks. What do you think?" Jacob answered that he thought it would work.

I used my time with Jacob to reinforce the idea of seeing events that happened as projects like the birdhouse. Each event offered its own set of directions and opportunities for unique ways of approaching it. Just because something went wrong didn't mean that I was stupid or that I couldn't fix the problem. When I gave it some thought, I could come up with another approach and continue to feel good about myself. I asked Jacob if we could look back at the Spelling Competition and see if we could look at that another way. For example:

**A**dvorsity: I'm not good under pressure and I never win at anything.

*(First thought)*

**B**elief: Nothing ever goes well for me. If I were a smarter student I might have a chance. I must not have studied hard enough.

**C**onsequence: These events make me frustrated and angry.

**D**isputation: I studied hard for this spelling competition and I deserve to win. I can't let the fact that I haven't done well in the past make me feel that I will not do well this time. I have worked hard, I should do well.

*(Improvement, change thought)*

**E**nergization: I feel better about my efforts as a student.

*(Keeping that thought)*

\*The ABCDE (Adversity, Belief, Consequence, Disputation, Energization) thought process was developed by Albert Ellis and expanded on by Dr. Martin Seligman in his book Learned Optimism.

We started practicing this process whenever an event would occur that would challenge Jacob or make him frustrated, angry or scared. It was a lot of effort for him to feel comfortable with the idea that he could make a difference in the way things turned out just by being more positive in his approach. Having the good thoughts outweigh the bad ones offered its own individual challenge since Jacob had practiced negative (pessimistic) self-talk for much of his young life. We now at least had a direction and an opportunity to turn things around. Adjusting Jacob's internal "rap sessions" helped him realize that he could make a difference in his finished product. Just like my birdhouse would never look just like Ms. Jones', Jacob's "learned optimism" (Seligman, 1991) would never be just like Michael's, but now at least, his first response would not be to give up or self-destruct. Jacob's eyes were now open to a more confident, functional and flexible approach for handling everyday situations. *For more information on this topic I recommend Dr. Martin Seligman's book Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life which deals with recognizing the differences between optimistic and pessimistic thinkers and how to encourage children as well as adults to move toward a more positive and healthier direction.*

#### References

Seligman, Martin E.P. (1991). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York: A.A. Knopf.