

FALLING AND GETTING UP

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When I was a little girl I loved ice-skating. I wanted to be Dorothy Hamill, and I was well on my way—sporting her signature haircut. Going to my first lesson, I was so excited to learn the spins and jumps. But to my disappointment, neither skill was covered that day. The first thing I was taught was how to fall and the second was how to get up. We spent several classes perfecting these fundamentals. I was impatient, though, and wanted desperately to advance to the more exciting moves. What I didn't recognize at the time was that falling was what I would be doing the most of while I was skating, and learning to get up and start again was critical to my ability to function on the ice.

I have been thinking about those lessons a lot lately as I watch my son learn to “skate”—not on the ice, but away from total dependence on his father and me and toward his own independence. He is only seven, but every day I see him growing, learning and, sometimes, falling.

It sure is hard to watch him fall!

I find myself wanting to catch him, to help him do things the right way—always, my way—so he doesn't get hurt. I find myself rushing to his aid when he falls to help extinguish his pain, be it physical or emotional. But just as falling was inevitable in ice-skating, it is unavoidable in life. I can't put my son in a protective bubble to keep him from falling! No matter how hard I may try, I can't take away the pain he may experience with each new fall. Even if I could, it wouldn't necessarily be what is best for him.

FALLING

Each day there are a myriad of ways that our children (and we, as parents) can experience falls. Unlike ice-skating, we would never want to teach them how to fall on purpose. Rather, we might teach that when there is a fall—especially when wrong choices are made—they should strive to get up as soon as possible. We want our children to recognize that when they have

done something wrong, it is also necessary to accept responsibility and move toward restoration.

For example, say your child forgets to complete a school assignment—which will likely result in a lesser grade. As parents, our first instinct may be to contact the teacher to smooth things over. Depending on the age and needs of the child, that might be an appropriate action. However, if we repeatedly prevent them from experiencing these falls, they will have great difficulty taking accountability for themselves as they develop into adults.

What if the fall is more than casual forgetfulness or an innocent mistake? What if your child does something intentionally wrong—like hitting their sibling, lying or skipping school? These types of “falling” behaviors need more attention. These types of falls would be called sins. But like any fall, a sin requires compassion along with the corrective treatment. Just because a child is in the wrong doesn't mean he or she doesn't need love and concern to help them deal with the consequences of their action. These kinds of falls require immediate action on the part of your child—that is, to get up, accept responsibility and turn toward God. Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica writes, “The Holy Fathers and the saints always tell us, ‘It is important to get up immediately after a fall and to keep on walking toward God.’ Even if we fall a hundred times a day, it does not matter; we must get up and go on walking toward God without looking back.”

GET UP AND GO ON WALKING TOWARD GOD

Guiding our children to develop an active relationship with God will help them refocus and get up after falling. In the case of accidental stumbles, this relationship will help keep things in perspective. Or when they fall harder by intentionally turning away from God, their relationship with God will help them “come to themselves” as the Prodigal Son did and reconcile with their Heavenly Father who loves them.

Orienting our children toward God after they fall is easier said than done. One reason is our own struggle to readily return to Him after we sin. Everyone falls, everyone sins—every single one of us. The best witness we can give our children is striving to live our faith in the home daily. Here are some suggestions to help:

- **Be a model** – Show them how to ask for forgiveness when they have done something wrong. Very young children will struggle with entirely understanding this concept. Don't force them, but continue to model through your behavior: "Johnny, I am so sorry I yelled at you earlier. I was frustrated because I stepped on your Legos. Mommy should not have yelled. I love you. Now, I need you to go pick up your Legos."
- **Go to confession** – Your child should know that you go regularly to the Sacrament of Confession. Let your child know how important it is to be reconciled with God and others. Here are some resources on confession that can help you prepare yourself as well as your child when he or she is ready to start going to confession:
 - "Children and Confession" – This short interview with Rev. Fr. Alexander Goussetis explores when and how to introduce our children to confession: www.myocn.net/children-and-confession.
 - *The Forgotten Medicine: The Mystery of Repentance* – This book by Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev explains the process of confession—before, during and after.
 - *Nicholas Wins the Prize: Young Nicholas Experiences the Sacrament of Confession* – Helen Dalalakis's book tells the story of Nicholas, who cheats in a school spelling contest. He goes to confession and is shown lovingly how God forgives.
 - *Raising Lazarus Project* – This small workbook helps children of different ages prepare for confession. Copies can be ordered from St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church in Loveland, Colorado.



- **Get to know your priest** – Even if your children aren't old enough to go to confession, take them to visit your parish priest. Encouraging your children to develop a relationship with him teaches them that the Church is here to help us pray, grow and heal when we fall.
- **Read inspirational stories** – Find stories that model Christian perseverance and repentance in the Bible and lives of the saints. Here are some great ones to start with:
 - The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)
 - The story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37–45)
 - The story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10)
- **Share your stumbles** – When it is fitting, admit times when you have failed and things you struggle with. This can help children understand that no one is perfect. It can be simple: "Wow, I made a big mistake today; I wasn't paying attention and I broke the glass ornament that your grandmother got us. I know I need to talk with her, but I am feeling really bad." Be discerning when you choose to share. Some instances might not be appropriate for your children to hear and may cause them more stress instead of offering a useful lesson.

No matter how well we teach our children how to "spin" and "jump" while moving through life, there will always be falls—for them and us. When our children are very young, we are there as they take their first steps. We hold their hands when they are unstable and catch them when they fall. As they grow, however, we cannot always be there to hold their hands. They will take steps into adulthood on their own, hopefully knowing that, as parents, we are praying for them but more importantly that God waits with open arms for them after each and every fall—loving them just as much as He did the day He created them.

It is good, then, not to fall; or, if we fall, to rise again. And should we fall, we should not despair and so estrange ourselves from the Lord's love. For if He so chooses, He can deal mercifully with our weakness. Only we should not cut ourselves off from Him or feel oppressed when constrained by His commandments, nor should we lose heart when we fall short of our goal. Rather, let us learn that a thousand years in the sight of the Lord are but a single day, and a single day is as a thousand years (Psalm 90:4). Let us be neither hasty nor tardy, and let us be always ready to make a new start. If you fall, rise up. If you fall again, rise up again. – St. Peter of Damascus

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