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FAIL-SAFE

by Ruth Prins

Atomic bombs? Diplomatic bobbles? No. This kind of fail-safe is a child's dodge to avoid repetition of what he felt to be a failure: "fail-and-be-safe."

Ray had tried. Once. Failed. Now he was lodged firmly behind a wall of feigned indifference. A game had --for him-- turned into a competition. Ray was used to being first. He was larger, stronger, could read better, and figure better than his peers. Suddenly he was confused. When the music stopped everyone sat down as quickly as he could. But others sat down more quickly. As they pointed out! Ray was appalled. He definitely wasn't first. Others who had been late sitting to cue were ~~laugh~~ laughing and saying, "Let's try it again!" Ray said, "I'll watch." As occasions occurred on other days for the game to be played, Ray studiously avoided the issue. He found tasks in other classrooms. He suddenly was very helpful at cleaning up. When openly invited to join he said off-handedly, "I'll help decide who's last."

This was no adjustment but a cry for help. Successful learning is important; so is successful failure. Billy liked to compete too.

"Do you like to lose, Billy?"

"No," truthfully answered Billy. "I like to win. It makes me happy when I win; it makes me sad when I lose...but I just try again 'cause next time I might do better and when I lose

I try harder and I think there's maybe a better way to do it so I think maybe I sort of like to lose 'cause then I try and try and try and probably I'll win once and then I'm proud of myself!"

"It makes me sad when I lose too," said Karl, "but if I like the game I don't care too much. Anyway," he added with a dutifully echo, "you have to be a good sport."

"What's a good sport?"

"You don't cry!"

Anna said, "I think it means laughing and saying 'Let's do it again' like Billy does," There was a chorus of agreement.

"Billy even fell down once and everybody laughed and he just got up and laughed too," said Ray slowly with a tinge of wonder to his voice. "He laughed like he didn't care..but he did..because he said, 'Let's do it again.'"

"Did you really care?" asked Christy.

"Sure," said Billy, "but I keep tryin' and tryin' and tryin' 'cause...well that's the way I learn."

d The music started. the children began to circle. Ray moved sluggishly in the periphery but as the cadence increased and the fun of moving to the sprightly sounds caught at him he began to enter whole-heartedly. Suddenly the music stopped. Susan was first.

"Bet I'm first next time," shrilled Christy.

"Or me," said Billy.

"Or me," said Anna.

". .. or me!" said Ray.

How does your child accept defeat? Can he use it to motivate himself? Can he build on failure to reach success? Or does he employ

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PAGE THREE

the dodge of withdrawal, retreat, avoidance? Fail...hide...and
be safe?