

What Do Kids Really Learn from Failure? (##)

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By Alfie Kohn

*Education experts have long known that there is more to success – in school or in life – than cognitive ability. That recognition got a big boost with science writer Dan Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence* in 1996, which emphasized the importance of self-awareness, altruism, personal motivation, empathy, and the ability to love and be loved.*

But a funny thing has happened to the message since then. When you hear about the limits of IQ these days, it's usually in the context of a conservative narrative that emphasizes not altruism or empathy but something that sounds suspiciously like the Protestant work ethic. More than smarts, we're told, what kids need to succeed is old-fashioned grit and perseverance, self-discipline and will power. The goal is to make sure they'll be able to resist temptation, override their unconstructive impulses, and put off doing what they enjoy in order to grind through whatever they've been told to do. (I examined this issue in an earlier essay called "Why Self-Discipline is Overrated.")

Closely connected to this sensibility is the proposition that

children benefit from plenty of bracing experiences with frustration and failure. Ostensibly this will motivate them to try even harder next time and prepare them for the rigors of the unforgiving Real World. However, it's also said that children don't get enough of these experiences because they're overprotected by well-meaning but clueless adults who hover too close and catch them every time they stumble.

This basic story, which has found favor with journalists as well as certain theorists and therapists, seems plausible on its face because some degree of failure is unavoidable and we obviously want our kids to be able to deal with it. On closer inspection, though, I think there are serious problems with both the descriptive and prescriptive claims we're being asked to accept.

Is failure rare? The idea that "kids today" have it too easy is part of a broader conservative worldview that's been around for a long, long time. Children are routinely described as coddled and indulged, overprotected and overpraised. But I've been unable to find any data to support this claim, which may explain why it rests mostly on provocative anecdotes. Even if we could agree on how much protection (or parenting) merits the prefix over-, there's simply no proof that the phenomenon is widespread, much less that it's more common today than it was 10, 20, 50, or 100 years ago.

Moreover, even if it were shown that some parents cushion their children more than you or I think they should, that doesn't mean these kids are unacquainted with frustration or failure. To see life through a child's eyes for even a short time is to realize that, quite apart from a parent's willingness to intervene, children frequently come up short, don't get what they want, and find themselves on the receiving end of critical judgments from their peers or adults.

Is failure useful? A hypothetical child who managed to succeed in every one of his endeavors, or who always got everything he desired, might well find it hard to cope if things suddenly turned sour. But are we entitled to conclude from this fanciful thought experiment that failure is beneficial, or that parents and teachers should deliberately stand back rather than help out?

Research certainly doesn't support the idea that failure or disappointment is constructive in itself. A "BGUTI" (better get used to it) rationale – the assumption that children are best prepared for unpleasant experiences that may come later by being exposed to a lot of unpleasantness while they're young – makes no sense from a psychological perspective. We may want kids to rebound from failure, but that doesn't mean it's usually going to happen – or that the experience of failure makes that desired outcome more likely.

In fact, studies find that when kids fail, they tend to construct an image of themselves as incompetent and even helpless, which leads to more failure. (They also come to prefer easier tasks and lose interest in whatever they're doing.) In one study, students were asked to solve problems that were rigged to ensure failure. Then they were asked to solve problems that were clearly within their capabilities. What happened? Even the latter problems paralyzed them because a spiral of failure had been set into motion. By the same token, if an adult declines to step in and help when kids are frustrated, that doesn't make them more self-sufficient or self-confident: It mostly leaves them feeling less supported, less secure about their own worthiness, and more doubtful about the extent to which the parent or teacher really cares about them.

Have some people experienced failure but then gone on to be wildly successful? Obviously. But things don't work out this way for most people. And even when it does happen, we can't conclude that experience with failure was responsible for the

success. (Also, we should be careful to define what we mean by “successful.” One can end up rich or famous without being an admirable or psychologically healthy human being.)

What determines the impact of failure? Why do some people throw in the towel as soon as things get tough? Why do other people get back on the horse? (And why are so many of us unable to discuss these issues without resorting to stale metaphors?) To talk about grit and resilience is to focus on the attributes of individuals. But it may make more sense to look at the situations in which people find themselves and the nature of the tasks they’re being asked to do.

Challenge – which carries with it a risk of failure – is a part of learning. That’s not something we’d want to eliminate. But when students who are tripped up by challenges respond by tuning out, acting out, or dropping out, they sometimes do so not because of a deficiency in their makeup (lack of stick-to-itiveness) but because those challenges – what they were asked to do – aren’t particularly engaging or relevant. Finger-wagging adults who exhort students to “do their best” sometimes don’t offer a persuasive reason for why a given task should be done at all, let alone well. And if the rejoinder is that it doesn’t matter if the assignment is just busywork because kids need to develop “good work habits” across the board, well, a reasonable person would wonder who stands to benefit when children are taught to work hard at anything that they’re assigned to do by someone with more power.

A second explanation for students’ not rebounding from failure at what they were asked to do is that they weren’t really “asked” to do it – they were told to do it: deprived of any say about the content or context of the curriculum. People of all ages are more likely to persevere when they have a chance to make decisions about things that affect them. Thus, the absence of choice might be a better explanation than a character defect for giving up.

And here's yet another possibility. Maybe the problem is that the educational environment emphasizes how well students are doing rather than what they're doing: It's all about achievement! performance! results! rigor! and not about the learning itself. Educational psychologists have found that when students are induced to think about grades and test scores – particularly, though not exclusively, when the point is to do better than everyone else – they will naturally attempt to avoid unnecessary risks. If the goal is to get an A, then it's rational to pick the easiest possible task. Giving up altogether just takes this response to its logical conclusion. "I'm no good at this, so why bother?" is not an unreasonable response when school is primarily about establishing how good you are.

Jerome Bruner said this: We want students to "experience success and failure not as reward and punishment but as information." That's a marvelous way to think about reframing unsuccessful experiences: My experiment, or my essay, didn't turn out the way I had hoped, and the reason that happened offers valuable clues for how I might take a different approach tomorrow. But this requires us (the adults) to do more than reframe or encourage. We have to address the structural factors that get in the way. For example, a student isn't going to view letter or number grades as informational feedback; they'll be seen as rewards and punishments, in part because that's exactly what they're intended to be.

The problem isn't with kids' attitudes or motivation as much as it is with our practices and policies. Yet potential problems with the latter are typically ignored by people who tell kids to grit their teeth, pull up their socks, and try, try again. Worse, these people may explicitly endorse those problematic practices or even call for more rigorous or competitive grading and testing. Some researchers use them to define success and failure – with high grades or test scores

uncritically accepted as a positive outcome for measuring the effects of grit or perseverance or a “growth mindset.”

Indeed, many people oppose even mild attempts to make the whole grading experience less debilitating, such as eliminating zeroes for individual assignments (given that zeroes, when averaged in with other marks, can drag down a child’s overall grade disproportionately). Not long ago, a Canadian teacher became a conservative folk hero for defying his district’s no-zero policy. He insisted on his prerogative to punish students by giving them the lowest possible grade.

Those who came to his defense invoked the familiar rhetoric of accountability, high standards, and the need to prepare kids for the real world. But ponder the irony! Many students whom a teacher brands with zeroes already see themselves as failures. They’re likely to experience his insistence that they be “held accountable” as yet another dose of humiliation and punishment. (And it’s the students’ perception, not the teacher’s intention, that determines the result.) The idea that another goose egg will snap them out of their cycle of failure and put them on the road to success is, to put it gently, naïve. (On the other hand, some people’s get-tough response is actually more moralistic than practical. The point may not have been to produce a better outcome for students at all but to make sure they don’t “get away with” something. If you do something bad, something bad must be done to you – regardless of the effect.)

In short, there’s reason to doubt the popular claim that kids have too little experience with failure. Or that more such experience would be good for them. What is clear is that the very environments that play up the importance of doing well make it even less likely that doing poorly will have any beneficial effect.

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