

FAILURE! WHAT A GENIUS IDEA!

A leading Victorian Independent school actively encourages its students to fail, which is an absolutely genius idea. Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School held a Failure Week to teach students that making mistakes is a crucial part of learning. Teachers shared their personal stories of failure and students from prep to Year 12 learned challenging activities such as abstract painting, juggling, reciting poetry and dancing. At the end of the week they displayed their new skills in front of each other with the emphasis being on stuff ups rather than perfection.

For many students making errors and struggling to get things right will feel uncomfortable. But that's the whole point.

Kids need to fail more if they are to succeed

Traditionally, schools and, in recent years, parents have excelled at celebrating student success. "Top marks", "Dux of the school" and "Perfect score!" are the types of aspirations that teachers and parents have for kids. But to many students academic success means "Don't stuff it up!", "No mistakes please!" and "Get it right!"

It's been widely reported that Australian kids are anxious, perfectionistic and risk-averse. They just don't feel comfortable with failure. Who could blame them as we've hidden failure and disappointment from them for too long.

There's been the perception in recent years, that failure damages people. This is to the detriment of young people's future success. Failure is an integral part of learning anything significant, challenging or worthwhile. Resilient learners realise that they don't always get things right the first or even the second time but with effort and practice you'll master skills, find solutions and gain the knowledge you need to succeed.

If handled properly, failure provides kids with the feedback to succeed that helps them achieve excellence. Yes, kids need positive feedback but only when it's deserved. When we tell a child everything is wonderful, when in fact, their work is mediocre at best, we give them a false sense of achievement.

Failure takes bravery

I've long been a fan of encouragement. That is, parents and teachers need to focus their comments on the processes (effort, contribution, improvement) of what kids do. Encouragement places the locus of control onto the child, which is essential for resilience. That doesn't mean that we avoid giving a child feedback if their work or behaviour isn't up to scratch. By all means, we should inform kids when they need to lift their games, but it needs to be done respectfully and with sensitivity, if the feedback is to be taken on board.

But the real strength of encouragement is hidden in its French derivative 'to give heart'. It takes a brave soul to make a mistake sometimes, particularly when others may be watching.

Failure needs a supportive environment

It's all very well to encourage kids to have a go but they won't stretch themselves unless mistakes are truly accepted by the people that matter to them. A child won't speak up in class when he's unsure of the answer if he knows his classmates will laugh at his errors. Similarly, if kids are to take more learning and social risks they need to know that mistakes won't be thrown back in their faces at home by parents or siblings.

Five simple ways to encourage kids to fail and celebrate errors:

1. Model failure: Next time you break a plate when emptying the dishwasher, avoid negative language ("What a klutz!") or catastrophising ("This is the worst thing ever!). It's a plate. Stuff happens.

2. Tell stories of failure: We tend to be nostalgic of the past and tell kids of the good stuff when we talk about our childhoods. But kids love to hear the warts'n'all stories of the difficulties you faced and stuff-ups you made as a kid. It makes you more human and also gives them permission to do the same.

3. Encourage them: Develop a vocabulary around effort, improvement, contribution and enjoyment. Be your child's cheerleader but don't avoid giving feedback when necessary.

4. Tell and show kids how to improve: Feedback is always best when it has a teaching focus. So next time you pick up a child on their poor schoolwork or untidy bedroom, make sure you remind them how to do it right.

5. Provide the time to fail and get it right: Modern teachers and parents are time poor. Crowded curricula and busy lifestyles make us less tolerant of failure. But as anyone who has taught a young child to do up his or her shoelaces will know, some things can't be rushed. Time and patience can be your best assets when helping kids to handle learning challenges.

Failure doesn't sit comfortably with many of us, but it's an essential element to success. The idea of a school setting aside a week to encourage their students to fail more may challenge our perceptions of the education process. But it's a very timely, very smart idea that should be adopted and adapted by schools and families everywhere.

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