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Elementary school Principal Peter DeWitt writes about students' social and emotional health, and how educators can help young people find common ground. He was selected as the 2013 New York State Outstanding Educator of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York State. He can be found at www.petermdewitt.com.



Peter DeWitt

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What Can We Learn From Failure?

By Peter DeWitt on August 3, 2013 10:24 AM

What really happens when we fail? I guess that all depends on what we are failing at, and how many times we actually fail. It matters whether we have a supportive family or one that shows no support at all. Failure means something different to all of us. It may mean not getting the job we wanted, or to others it might mean never finding a job at all.

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Our students do know a thing or two about failing as well. To one student, failing may mean scoring a 90 on a test when they are accustomed to getting a 100 (Hopefully they have parents who understand that a 90 is not bad from time to time). To another student, failure may be something more drastic, like failing to get into the school of their choice.

All schools have students who seem to find failure around every corner, and are exposed to it on a daily basis at their home. They are neglected by their families or have parents who take drugs or abuse alcohol, and their children always come in second place to the next high. Those students enter into our schools feeling like all the adults around them won't care, so they move through life anticipating the next failure...or at least expecting it will happen soon.

Then we have students who are somewhere in between. They are sheltered from failure. Their parents contact whomever they can to make sure their child doesn't fail. Whether it's the principal, coach or the English teacher, there are parents who do not want their children to feel unsuccessful, even though we should all feel that way from time to time. I firmly believe that we all should experience failure.

Is failure that bad?

Can our students learn from failure?

Miller-Lewis et al (2013) found that, "There is great individual variation in children's response to adversity, and many children exposed to adversity escape relatively unscathed and instead function adequately" (p.2).

Unfortunately, we don't talk about this enough. When kids hear adults use the word "fail," they

only see the negative aspects of it, which is unfortunate because failure can teach us a great deal. We can learn how to do something better, or when to walk away because we may not be good at something at all.

Clearly, there are students who live with failure too often and they need help to guide through it. They need the help of a supportive adult to become resilient. **Cicchetti** (2010) wrote,

"The factors associated with resilient functioning: a) close relationships with competent and caring adults in the family and community; b) self-regulation abilities; c) positive views of self; d) motivation to be effective in the environment (i.e., self-efficacy and self-determination); and e) friendships and romantic attachments with prosocial and well-regulated peers" (pp.6 & 7).

Does Accountability Set Children Up to Fail?

Unfortunately, in these days of increased mandates and accountability, teachers are at risk of defining students by numbers, which come in the form of the grades they receive on high stakes tests. Students who receive a 2 are at risk of being labeled a 2 by their teachers and administrators. What's worse is with common standards like the Common Core (CCSS), students are at even greater risk of failing.

As they leave one grade in pursuit for the next, they have to prove that they can meet the grade level exit expectations as well as the entrance level expectations to the next grade level. What happens when they cannot meet the benchmark? Unfortunately, teachers are beginning to discuss the topic of grade retention again. It's a topic that should have seen its end long ago, but grade retention may be making a comeback.

We know that not all students are at the same academic level and the CCSS only provide the false hope that all students can achieve at the same level at the same time. Teachers and administrators who look at the CCSS as the benchmark are less likely to differentiate because they are concerned that if they "water down" the curriculum, the students leaving them will not be prepared for the state assessments or the next grade level. In addition, students who fail to meet these expectations negatively affect the score of their teacher, and might cause them to fail.

Waxman et al says that, *"Students at risk of academic failure often face a complexity of problems caused by poverty, health, and other social conditions that have made it difficult for them to succeed in school"*(2003. p.1).

It's important to remember that no matter the weight of accountability, students should be taught how to be resilient to failure. Quite honestly, during this time of increased accountability, we can all learn a thing or two about resilience.

Social Media puts failures in the spotlight

As much as social media is a great tool that can connect us with other like-minded people, it also poses a problem for students. Sometimes I feel badly for children because they are hit with images all day every day. If they make a mistake at school or embarrass themselves with friends, they become at risk of hearing about it through Twitter, Facebook and other social networking mediums. Social media isn't always kind to failure.

Simple mistakes, that we all made as kids, can now be easily sent to thousands of friends and can become viral. What's worse is that there are some kids who want their mistakes to go viral, which they may regret many years later.

However, in this day and age, which sounds really old, mistakes on social media is the modern way for kids to experience failure. As much as the adults around them may want to prevent it, we also have to teach kids how to handle it. They need to learn how to accept their failures, apologize if they hurt someone, and move on to other ventures.

Instead of protecting students from failure, especially if they are at high risk, we have to teach them that it is a natural part of life. One of the ways they can better handle the failure that we all experience, is to teach them the coping skills they need to move forward. Without coping skills, life becomes a series of negative events.

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There are a variety of ways to help children cope with, and work through, failure. One of the easiest and most effective ways to discuss any subject in an age-appropriate way is through the use of children's picture books and young adult literature. Depending on the age of the children, there are a variety of picture books and young adult novels that focus on failure. The following are a few:

Books About Failure

- *Mirette on the High Wire* - Emily Arnold McCauley
- *Mrs. Mack* - Patricia Polacco
- *Homemade Books to Help Kids Cope: An Easy to Learn Technique F/Parents & Professionals* - Robert G. Ziegler
- *Frédéric* by Leo Lionni
- *The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins: An Illuminating History of Mr. Waterhouse Hawkins, Artist and Lecturer* - Barbara Kerley,; Brian Selznick (Illustrator)
- *Ish* - Peter H. Reynolds
- *The Bedspread* - Sylvia Fair
- *Giraffes Can't Dance* - Giles Andreae
- *Handel, Who Knew What He Liked* - M.T. Anderson and Kevin Hawkes
- *Song of Middle C* - Alison McGhee and Scott Menchin
- *The Black Swan* - Nassim Nicholas Taleb
- *The Smartest Guys in the Room* - McLean and Elkind
- *Loser* - Jerry Spinelli

Connect with Peter on Twitter

Resources:

- Cicchetti, Dante (2010) *Resilience under conditions of extreme stress: a multilevel perspective.* *World Psychiatry.* 2010 Oct; 9 (3):145-54.
- Miller-Lewis, Lauren, Amelia K Searle, Michael G Sawyer, Peter A Baghurst and Darren Hedley (2013). *Resource factors for mental health resilience in early childhood: An analysis with multiple Methodologies.* *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 2013, 7:6
- Waxman, Hersh, Jon P. Gray, Yolanda N. Padrón (2003). *Review of Research on Educational Resilience.* *Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence.*

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John Bennett

Score: 0

Reply

11:23 AM on August 3, 2013

It should start very young: mistakes or failures are bad only if

the effort to honestly try is missing!!! Parents and families need to introduce youngsters to risk / challenge AND to the learning that can come as a result (both in the efforts made and the reflection afterward) and is so valuable. Indeed, one of the issues for LECs -

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2013/02/local_education_communities.html - to consider most likely should be risk / challenge for those young students not getting the experience at home!

I'm getting the added opportunity with our grandchildren! Having six acres together with a riding lawn mower and a 23-HP tractor, they began taking risks (to them, not to Papa - who was always closeby). By the way, early on all by themselves, the older ones developed practice driving courses, driving tests, and printed licenses for all to get if they wanted broad access.

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Cooper JC Zale

Score: 0

Reply

11:22 AM on August 4, 2013

IMO as a parent of two now young adult kids, standardized education attempts to program human development for at least 13 years of everyone's young life, away from self-initiated exploration, away from trial and error, away from anything that isn't tried and true and previously digested, standardized and prepared in a track of guaranteed success if you just jump thru all the hoops the programmed path has expertly devised for you.

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Radical educator John Taylor Gatto provocatively calls it "weapons of mass instruction" that's goal is to produce a "mass of clerks" working for the children of the elite who avoid this sort of pre-fab unnourishing education.

<http://www.leftyparent.com/blog/2010/11/13/jazz-and-imagination-not-a-mass-of-clerks/>



Jim Hoffman

Score: 0

Reply

5:42 PM on August 4, 2013

We do not fail when we fall. We fail when we don't overcome it. Learning to deal with failure is a critical attribute in a person. Every student experiences failure at some point in their lives. We (parents and teachers) need to work together in teaching our children how to meet those failures and learn from them.

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