

LEARNING to FAIL

Anya Waddington looks at why it is important NOT to succeed sometimes. Illustration by Kimberley Scott

Top of the class. Lead role in the school play. Selected for the A Team. Winner of the race. We live in a success-obsessed world; a world where parents put untold pressure on their children to be top dog. Competition for places at London independent secondary schools is fierce and many bright, able children inevitably face rejection at a young age. But, of course, all of us fail in some form or other somewhere along the line, and what most parents forget is allowing their children to fail is an important part of future success.

In her book, *Taming the Tiger Parent*, Tanith Carey points out that most parents feel trapped in a never-ending race to ensure that their child is the brightest and the best at everything. From Einstein DVDs for babies, to iPad learning apps for toddlers and a booming tutoring business; everything plays on parents' fears that they're not

doing enough. However, there's evidence to suggest that this race to be number one is back-firing. We are raising a generation of anxious, worried children and, far from ensuring that our children are more successful, it is having the opposite effect: damaging their emotional well-being and fracturing relationships with their parents.

If we drive our children to define themselves only by success how will they deal with the inevitable setbacks in life? Helen Fraser, Chief Executive of the Girls' Day School Trust, thinks that – particularly for girls – constant striving for perfection (exercise books full of neat ticks with no crossings out) is a problem. She believes this fear of failure not only prevents girls taking risks at school but holds them back further down the line in the workplace: not wanting to make a suggestion in case it is wrong or not approved.



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There have been specific initiatives at GDST schools: pupils at Wimbledon High School took part in a “Failure Week”, the emphasis being on “having a go” rather than playing it safe. The week included high-flying adult speakers who had experienced setbacks or downright failures that they considered to be ultimately positive and contributory to their successes. At Oxford High School they introduced a Maths test where it was impossible to achieve 100 per cent.

Fraser is adamant that from Reception girls need to be equipped with resilience and determination to take risks in their everyday schooling. She sees competitive all-inclusive sport (there must be an E team if necessary) as hugely important in this respect. As a group of schools, the GDST has plenty of opportunity for fun, healthy competition: whether this be inter-sport events, their Great Bake Off or junior choir competitions. There’s only one winning team but everyone else enjoys and benefits from taking part. As she says, “In a great school there will be a pathway for every child.”

Lucy Elphinstone, the Head at Francis Holland Sloane Square, sees it as the school’s job to “prepare the girls for life” and part of real life is about struggle, rejection and sadness. In a recent assembly she explained to the girls: “The difference between high achievers and underachievers is that all high achievers learn to fail well, whereas all underachievers fail badly.”

Francis Holland operates with three Cs in mind: Courage, Character and Creativity. They continually encourage girls to push out of their comfort zone. The Exploration Society (from Reception through to the Sixth Form) teaches the girls survival skills while getting cold wet and muddy! They were the pilot school for a mindfulness programme for primary schools (Paws.b) and they regularly have staff sports fixtures where teachers join in, regardless of whether they are natural netball players.

Joan McGillewie, Head of the Falcons Girls School in Fulham, recognizes that the 11+ is a system they have to face, but believes the secret is in how you do it. She believes passionately that creativity is at the source of learning. Philosophy is part of the curriculum from Year 3 onwards. They held a ‘Robert the Bruce Day’ (filled with activities which were unlikely to result in the expected, or desired, outcome) of which the primary aim was to encourage girls to take more risks in the classroom and not worry about getting it right. A Year 6 girl reflected afterwards: “Failing wasn’t a good feeling ... today I learned something new: if you don’t try, you will definitely fail; however, if you try, you have given yourself a chance to succeed.”

Catherine Tomlinson, Head of St James’ in Kensington Olympia, feels that all-round education is in danger of getting lost when focusing on the 11+. Not because she thinks that the exam itself is wrong, but because of the pressures surrounding it. This pressure takes its toll on family life; weekends filled with frenetic extracurricular activities to try and make children’s CVs stand out, at the expense of precious downtime. St James’ goes all the way through from 4 to 18 (with an automatic transfer from Junior to Senior schools) and they do not specifically prepare for the 11+. Central to the school’s ethos is that they enjoy learning and playing and are able to express themselves. Tomlinson’s definition of success? “Be your best self.”

It’s no surprise that boarding schools such as Lancing and Lambrook report a marked increase in the number of children from London whose parents are keen to escape the pressure-cooker environment. In part, a boarding school (with fewer time constraints and extensive facilities) can offer more opportunities to develop confidence and allow pupils to find their niche, but Dan Connolly, Registrar at

Lancing, believes it’s also about creating an atmosphere “where they can spread their wings and become confident and put down roots for life.” He pinpoints two mainstays for this: an emphasis on self-discovery rather than excellence (self-discovery might lead to excellence but it is not a necessity – having a go is the most important thing), and a solid support structure for when things come a cropper, which they do for everyone,

especially teenagers, at some point.

Jonathan Perry, Headmaster at Lambrook in Berkshire, sees preparing pupils for the pressure of senior schools (where they find themselves suddenly a small fish in a big pond) and for life’s ups and downs beyond, as crucial. Like Fraser, he views inclusive competitive sport as vital. The school also has The Lambrook Leadership Challenge from Year 5 upwards. A bit like a junior Duke of Edinburgh scheme, a British paratrooper runs it, and every child is given some sort of experience in leadership. Pupils are exposed to all sorts of challenges with a period of reflection afterwards to think about what went right and wrong. They have also run a popular series of talks entitled “I am and I can”, where the premise was to build self-esteem. For him it is about “setting the recognition that whatever the outcome, if you’ve done your best and worked hard you should be proud of the result.”

We could do well to remember that failure and defeat is one of life’s greatest teachers. In the words of Fred Astaire, ‘Pick yourself up, Take a deep breath, Dust yourself off, And start all over again.’

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