

Helping Kids Overcome Fear of Failure by Vicki Zakrzewski

According to the research on failure, students may need more than just grit to succeed.

A couple of weeks ago, a New York Times op-ed asked the question, “Are kids too coddled?” In other words, shouldn’t we let them fail once in awhile so they develop some backbone? Or don’t they just need more grit?

The answer is not that simple because human beings are not that simple.

According to UC Berkeley professor Martin Covington, the fear of failure is directly linked to your self-worth, or the belief that you are valuable as a person. As a result, Covington found that students will put themselves through unbelievable psychological machinations in order to avoid failure and maintain the sense that they are worthy—which, as all of us who have ever dealt with the fear of failure know, can have long-term consequences.

Fortunately, the research also provides tips for educators to help students deal with feelings of failure—and help them to fulfill their true potential.

The Games We Play to Avoid Failure

Covington’s years of research found that one way people protect their self-worth is by believing they are competent and making others believe it as well.

Hence, the ability to achieve—and the quality of performance that reveals that ability—is critical to maintaining self-worth. This is particularly true in competitive situations such as school and, later, the workplace. In a nutshell, failing to perform means that one is not able and, therefore, not worthy.

If a person doesn’t believe he or she has the ability to succeed—or if repeated failures diminish that belief—then that person will begin, consciously or not, to engage in practices or make excuses in order to preserve his or her self-worth both in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of others. The more intense the effort behind the failure, the more important the excuses or defense mechanisms become.

Covington found that, when it comes to dealing with failure, students generally fall into four categories.

1. **Success-Oriented Students:** These are the kids who love learning for the sake of learning and see failure as a way to improve their ability rather than a slight on their value as a human being. Research has also found that these students tend to have parents who praise success and rarely, if ever, reprimand failure.

2. **Overstrivers:** These students are what Covington calls the “closet-achievers.” They avoid failure by succeeding—but only with herculean effort motivated solely by the fear that even one failure will confirm their greatest fear: that they’re not perfect.

Because the fear of failure is so overpowering and because they doubt their abilities, Overstrivers will, on occasion, tell everyone that they have very little time to prepare for an upcoming test—and then spend the entire night studying. When they pass the test with flying colors, this “shows” everyone that they are brilliant because their “ability” trumped the need to extend any effort.

3. **Failure-avoiding:** These students don’t expect to succeed—they just want to avoid failing. They believe that if they extend a lot of effort but still fail, then this implies low ability and hence, low worth. But if they don’t try and still fail, this will not reflect negatively on their ability and their worth remains intact.

In order to avoid failure that might be due to lack of ability, they do things such as make excuses (the dog ate my homework), procrastinate, don’t participate, and choose near-impossible tasks. However, this can put them into a tricky position when they encounter a teacher who rewards effort and punishes for what appears to be lack of effort or worse. Ultimately, there’s no way out for these students—either they try and fail or they’re punished.

4. **Failure-accepting:** These are the hardest students to motivate because they’ve internalized failure—they believe their repeated failures are due to lack of ability and have given up on trying to succeed and thus maintain their self-worth. Any success they might experience they ascribe to circumstances outside their control such as the teacher giving them the easiest task in a group project.

Two more points: Both failure-avoiding and failure-accepting students tend to focus on non-academic areas where they can succeed, such as sports or art or even risky behavior. And students who, in general, are motivated by fear of failure tend to have parents who rarely praise success, and instead punish failure. This leads these students to believe that their parents’ love is conditioned upon their academic success.

Understanding how the complexity of the fear of failure can lead some students to succeed in school and others to give up makes it evident that telling students to “buck-up and deal” when the going gets tough won’t work for many or most of them.

Overcoming the Fear of Failure

So what can teachers do to help their students become success- rather than failure-oriented? There are no easy answers and not all the research-based suggestions below will work with each kind of failure-orientation. The key is for teachers to know their students well and recognize when they are starting to engage in failure-based behavior.

1. Emphasize effort over ability. Thanks to Carol Dweck's research on mindsets, many teachers have started to give more importance to students' efforts rather than their "innate" ability. This is particularly important for teachers of upper elementary students through university as research has shown that as children get older, they tend to value ability over effort.

One way to encourage effort is to provide specific feedback to students that recognizes and praises effort. Studies have shown that students who receive this kind of feedback are not only more motivated to succeed, but also believe that they can succeed. However, be careful not to tell students to try harder if they failed, particularly if a lot of effort was expended to succeed. Otherwise, they may begin to doubt their abilities and eventually become failure-avoidant or accepting.

2. Encourage students to practice self-compassion when they fail. Covington suggests that at the heart of the fear of failure is a push-pull between self-acceptance and being able to see ourselves as we really are. This is where self-compassion can help.

Kristin Neff writes in her book *Self-Compassion* that in order for self-compassion to be effective, we have to first realize that, "Our true value lies in the core experience of being a conscious being who feels and perceives." In other words, rather than making our self-worth contingent on categories such as academic success, appearance, or popularity, we must value ourselves solely for the fact that we are human beings and accept that failure is part of the human experience.

When we do that, it is easier for us to extend compassion to ourselves when we fail. Rather than beating ourselves up for not being perfect in something like academics—as the Overstriver might do—we practice self-talk that is kind and compassionate. This makes it easier to look realistically at what caused the failure and then consider what can be done to improve next time.

Research has found that people who practice self-compassion recover more quickly from failure and are more likely to try new things—mainly because they know they won't face a negative barrage of self-talk if they fail.

3. Build positive relationships with students. This is particularly important for students who are failure-avoidant or accepting. Research has shown that students are motivated to try their best when teachers to whom they feel attached value academic tasks. Studies have also shown the opposite to be true—that students are less motivated when faced with teachers whom they feel don't care about them.

One final suggestion that Covington makes is to talk with students about how the fear of failure might be impacting their lives. When he did this with undergraduates, he found that they were grateful for the information as it helped them take control of their attitude and behavior toward schoolwork.

Deepening our understanding of the fear of failure not only can make us more compassionate and understanding of our students—but of ourselves as well.