

“If you can’t make a mistake, you can’t make anything!” : Helping able children to put failure into perspective

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What does failure feel like?

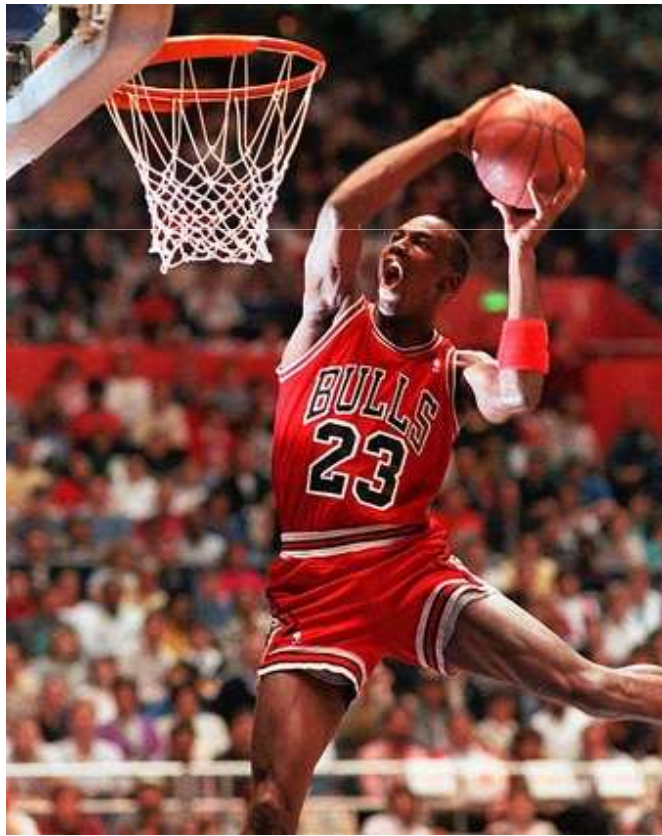


Some questions....

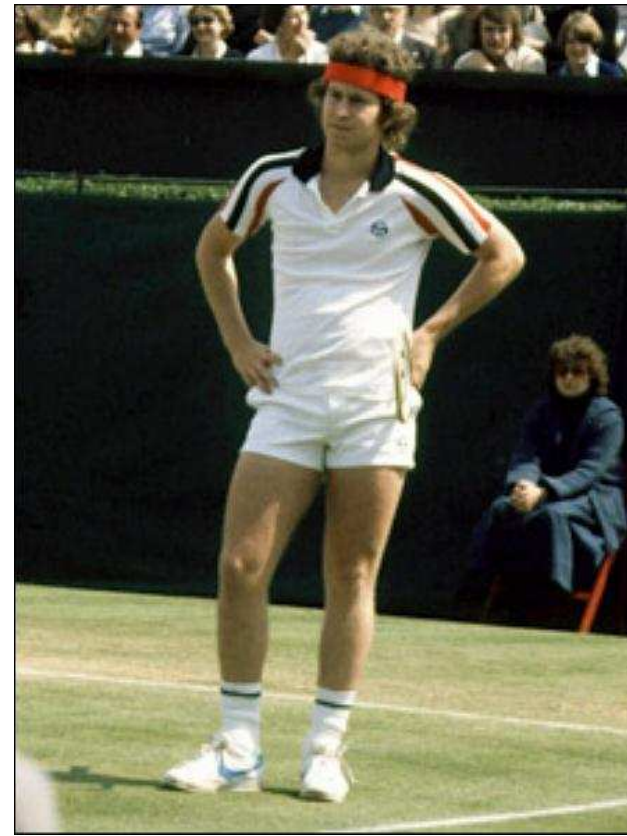
- How does failure motivate (or not) and why?
- Is there more than one way to be a perfectionist?
- Where do coping strategies fit in, and how do we promote successful coping?
- What can we do as parents and teachers to help change the meaning of failure?

A tale of two sportsmen

Michael Jordan



John McEnroe



Mastery vs Helplessness

- Why do some children fall apart at the smallest setbacks?
- 85% can be divided based on 2 distinct reactions to failure
- Diener & Dweck (1980)
 - Split children into mastery/helpless groups
 - Gave children 8 problems that they could solve easily – all enjoyed the task.
 - Next gave 4 problems that they couldn't solve

Mastery vs Helplessness – Social relationships

Mastery approaches to new situations can help in interacting in social situations

- Dweck Penpal studies
 - Children invited to write a letter to join a penpal club. First letter rejected.
 - Mastery-oriented children wrote longer letters, included more personal statements, said more explicitly friendly things.
 - Children who had a helpless mindset wrote the same letter, or shorter.

Perfectionism

- Great in small doses!
- Problem perfectionism – 2 main types
 1. Socially prescribed
 2. Self-oriented



Socially prescribed perfectionists

Themes in the development of socially prescribed perfectionists

1. Parental perfectionism
2. Authoritarian parenting
3. Stringent expectations
4. Identity/self-worth tied to achievement or pleasing others
5. Fear of disappointing others.

“If you are not doing something perfect, or above perfect, then you are doing something wrong”....maybe ok to fall short if you are physically sick but beyond that “there is no excuse for it”.

(Neumeister, 2004)

- “The thing that drives the perfectionism in me the most is other people....I would feel bad about myself because I would think others thought badly of me...I think how my teachers, my friends, and...how my parents think of me is what really drives it”

(Neumeister, 2004)

Self-oriented perfectionists

- Early academic experiences
- Parental perfectionism
- Authoritative/supportive parents
- High self-standards

Self-handicapping



Self-handicapping

- Related to self-esteem, perfectionism, conceptions of ability
- Obstacles to successful performance are constructed to protect or enhance self-esteem
- Aim to maintain positive feelings about themselves at the cost of dealing effectively with situations
- Emotion-focused coping instead of problem-focused

Coping with failure

Productive	Unproductive
Work Hard	worry
Focus on solving problem	Ignoring problem
Focus on positives	Self-blame
Seek social support	Keep to self
Seek relaxing diversions	Wishful Thinking

- Greater use of non-productive coping strategies is associated with less well-being

Emotion-focussed coping in perfectionists

- “When you get a bad grade on a test, you feel bad inside, and when you are trying to go to sleep at night, you just feel guilt, like really bad depressive guilt, like you did something seriously wrong that you should be ashamed of. And you have nobody to blame but yourself”

(Neumeister, 2004)

Turning failure on its head

- “I always try to make a mistake as quickly as possible...”
- If we can be bothered to persevere, failure is the quickest way to restructure our understanding



Richard Feynman
Nobel Prize for Physics, 1965

How can we help able children to be mastery-oriented learners?

- AfL
 - Encouraging pupils to be self-regulated learners
 - Asking children to revisit completed work
 - Build portfolios that show *progress*
- Deep learning
- Praise for effort
- Challenge!

Deep and surface learning

Deep Learning

- Intrinsically motivated
- Focus on extracting meaning from text
- Making connections
- Reading around a subject
- Asking questions
- Knowledge is rich & complex

Surface Learning

- Extrinsically motivated
- Skimming the surface of a subject
- Focus on memorising
- Learning in unconnected chunks
- Knowledge is simple

Adaptive help-seeking

- Requesting help needed to learn independently, not just to get the right answer.
- Part of self-regulated learning
- Fit into a wider framework of classroom goals that suggest
 - Value of long-term learning
 - Autonomy
 - Intrinsic value of learning
- Modelling good questioning – diagnosing problems

Adaptive help-seeking

- Beware of being the “expert”
- Conduct a “goal audit”
- 3 key steps for teachers
 1. Reduce embarrassment around asking questions
 2. Stress excitement of learning over marks
 3. Allow students to practice self-monitoring and self-questioning

What can parents do to help?

- Be aware of, and open about, your own experiences of perfectionism
- Try to emphasise excitement at learning, not attainment.
- Encourage wide exploration of topics to foster deep learning
- Think about how *you* cope with failure
- Model successful failure for your children

What can parents do to help?

- Help children and teens to set *realistic* goals – over-ambitious goal-setting will fail, and exacerbate things.
- Discuss results if your child is disappointed and make plans for what to improve next time. Timing is sensitive here!
- Adopt a questioning approach rather than a lecture
- Try to avoid extrinsic rewards such as money in return for grades.

What can teachers do to help ?

- Assessment for Learning approaches
- Challenging material
- Changing mindsets about mistakes
- Encourage revisions of work
- Encourage non-competitive learning experiences.
- Think about how failure is conceptualised in your classroom or school.

- Thomas Edison
“reportedly tried 2000 experiments to get the lightbulb to work”.
- ‘I never failed once. I invented the light bulb. It just happened to be a 2,000-step process.’”



How does this relate to the “smart economy”

- What is the “smart economy”?
- The role of failure in building a true smart economy
- Comments from CEO of Google about Leaving Cert learning by rote.
- Need to build resilience, persistence and self-efficacy in our young people

Letter to The Irish Times, March 11th 2010

“There is clearly a problem with the education system. Teachers now have the ability to predict whole Leaving Certificate exam papers. Over the past six months I have repeatedly heard my teachers saying that the Leaving Cert is a game: we just have to beat it.

I’m expected to learn off answers for a vast number of lengthy questions... leaving no choice but to join in the game. “

- From a 5th Year student

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What can we do to guard against
unhealthy perfectionism?

Tackling perfectionism