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COMMENTARY

Why Wrong Is Not Always Bad

By **Alina Tugend**

The conversation about schools and reform frequently focuses on how to do better. And doing better usually translates into excellent grades, high test scores, and ultimately getting into good colleges.

What we often lose in this conversation is something else—the need to teach kids how to fail. Yes, that four-letter word.

Now, I don't mean failing out of school. What I'm talking about is how so many of our children are taught, covertly or overtly, that mistakes are something to avoid at all costs, that there is only one right answer and if you don't know it, well, you're a failure.

Of course I'm aware that in too many schools, particularly in lower-income areas, too many children fail all the time—fail to learn to read, to think critically, to even finish high school. And that's an important discussion.

But the flip side of this problem—and yes, we more often see it in affluent schools—is also important. Children who, in fact, are rarely or never allowed to fail.

So what's wrong with that? A lot. We're creating, as one teacher told me, "victims of excellence." Kids who are afraid to take risks, to be creative, to be wrong. Because wrong is always bad.

We grow up with a mixed message: Making mistakes is a necessary learning tool, but we should avoid them.

Now, as a parent of a high schooler and a middle schooler living in an area where many parents regularly hire tutors and where the SUVs proudly sport decals from top colleges, I understand this fear of failure.

Some of it's real; I know my sons have to do pretty well academically to get into a decent college. But that reality gets so distorted, and the distortion becomes too easy to buy into—even for those of us who don't want to find ourselves focusing on results at the expense of the process.

And that's a real shame.

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Because when we tell kids that learning is all about the results, we teach them that mistakes are something to be feared and avoided. We stifle their interest in experimenting because experimenting means you're going to screw up and blunder and fail. And that's too big a risk.

Here's a fascinating experiment that shows how children absorb what we say about effort vs. results. **Carol Dweck**, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, has conducted groundbreaking research in this area. One of her experiments asked 400 5th graders in New York City schools to take an easy short test, on which almost all performed well. Half the children were praised for "being really smart." The other half were complimented for "having worked really hard."

Then the students were asked to take a second test and given the option of either choosing one that was pretty simple and that they would do well on, or one that was more challenging, but on which they might make mistakes.

Of those students praised for effort, 90 percent chose the harder test. Of those praised for being smart, the majority chose the easy test.

And there have been similar findings from similar research across age, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. As Professor Dweck told me: "One thing I've learned is that kids are exquisitely attuned to the real message, and the real message is 'Be smart.' It's not, 'We love it when you struggle or when you learn and make mistakes.' "

That's not universally true. For example, studies of North American (Canadian and American) and Asian cultures—primarily Japanese, and to some extent Chinese—have found a large difference in how mistakes are handled in preschool and elementary school classrooms.

For example, **James Stigler**, a psychology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has long researched comparisons between the two cultures' educational systems, says that in Japan a student can be asked to work out a math problem in front of the whole class for a healthy period of time—say, 12 minutes—even if he is doing it wrong.

The teacher might ask him to explain why he came up with his answer and then might turn to the whole class and ask who made similar mistakes. And unlike in an American class, students are far more likely to acknowledge their own misunderstandings.

"For Americans," Professor Stigler says, "errors tend to be interpreted as an indication of failure in learning the lesson. For Chinese and Japanese, they are an index of what still needs to be learned."

Much of this has to do with deeply embedded cultures—a focus in Japan on members of the community helping each other, rather than the individualism of American society. And I understand the constraints on teachers in this country in terms of time and curriculum and standardized tests.

But I think we can use these ideas to try to refocus how we're teaching children and what we're telling them about mistakes and failure.

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One way we can do this is by understanding the concepts of “fixed mind-sets” and “growth mind-sets.” Those with fixed mind-sets, as Professor Dweck says, believe either we’re good at something—whether it’s math or music or baseball—or we’re not. When we have this fixed mind-set, mistakes serve no purpose but to highlight failure.

Those with what Professor Dweck calls growth mind-sets, who believe that some people are better or worse in certain areas, but we can all improve and develop our skills and abilities, are much more likely to be able to accept mistakes because they know that they’re part of learning.

And it’s been shown that when students are taught about growth mind-sets, their motivation to learn improves.

I do know this message about the need for students to learn to blunder and fail resonates with teachers. When they hear me speak about the role of mistakes, they nod and tell me stories. Such as the 4th grade teacher who said she has high-performing students who fall apart when taking standardized tests because they don’t know what to do when they don’t know all the answers.

Or the high school art teacher who talked about students who broke down when he critiqued their work.

“As an employer, I would rather hire a good B or C student than an A student,” one teacher told me. “They’re able to take risks and be challenged.”

Of course, much of this onus to shift the way we look at and react to mistakes falls on parents. We have to be willing to let our children struggle and fail and make mistakes without always rushing in to protect them or fix the problem.

We also have to be careful not to give the contradictory message that mistakes are OK, except when they count.

Let me end with an anecdote about my 15-year-old son. He recently received a B-plus on a difficult research paper that he had worked fairly hard on. My first instinct was disappointment—it wasn’t an A. I asked to see the teacher’s comments. As I read them, I realized that they were thorough and insightful; in fact, it was a good, but not great paper.

I went over the comments with him. The process was working exactly as it should. He was learning. And so was I.

Alina Tugend writes the ShortCuts column for The New York Times. Her book, Better by Mistake: The Unexpected Benefits of Being Wrong, was published in March by Riverhead. She can be reached on Twitter at [@atugend](#) or at www.alinatugend.com.

