

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Alfie Kohn (b. 1957) is an American author of 10 books and scores of articles. His most frequent topics include discussions of American education and parenting. Many of Kohn's pieces challenge traditional or conventional attitudes and beliefs. The passage below is an adapted excerpt from an essay that appeared in The Huffington Post on October 3, 2012.

WHAT DO KIDS REALLY LEARN FROM FAILURE?

Education experts have long known that there is more to success—in school or in life—than cognitive ability. That recognition got a big boost with science writer Dan Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence* in 1996, which emphasized the importance of self-awareness, altruism, personal motivation, empathy, and the ability to love and be loved.

But a funny thing has happened to the message since then. When you hear about the limits of IQ these days, it's usually in the context of a conservative narrative that emphasizes not altruism or empathy but something that sounds suspiciously like the Protestant work ethic. More than smarts, we're told, what kids need to succeed is old-fashioned *grit* and *perseverance*, *self-discipline* and *will power*. The goal is to make sure they'll be able to resist temptation, override their unconstructive impulses, and put off doing what they enjoy in order to grind through whatever they've been told to do. (I examined this issue in an earlier essay called "Why Self-Discipline is Overrated.")

Closely connected to this sensibility is the proposition that children benefit from plenty of bracing experiences with frustration and failure. Ostensibly this will motivate them to try even harder next time and prepare them for the rigors of the unforgiving Real World. However, it's also said that children don't get enough of these experiences because they're overprotected by well-meaning but clueless adults who hover too close and catch them every time they stumble.

The basic story, which has found favor with journalists as well as certain theorists and therapists, seems plausible on its face because some degree of failure *is* unavoidable and we obviously want our kids to be able to deal with it. On closer inspection, though, I think there are serious problems with both the descriptive and prescriptive claims we're being asked to accept.

The idea that "kids today" have it too easy is part of a broader conservative worldview that's been around for a long, long time. Children are routinely described as coddled and indulged, overprotected and overpraised. But I've been unable to find any data to support this claim, which may explain why it rests mostly on provocative anecdotes. Even if we could agree on how much protection (or parenting) merits the prefix *over-*, there's simply no proof that the phenomenon is widespread, much less that it's more common today than it was 10, 20, 50, or 100 years ago.

Moreover, even if it were shown that some parents cushion their children more than you or I think they should, that doesn't mean these kids are unacquainted with frustration or failure. To see life through a child's eyes for even a short time is to realize that, quite apart from a parent's willingness to intervene, children frequently come up short, don't get what they want, and find themselves on the receiving end of critical judgments from their peers or adults.

A hypothetical child who managed to succeed in every one of his endeavors, or who always got everything he desired, might well find it hard to cope if things suddenly turned sour. But are we entitled to conclude from this fanciful thought experiment that failure is beneficial, or that parents and teachers should deliberately stand back rather than help out?

Research certainly doesn't support the idea that failure or disappointment is constructive in itself. A "BGUTI" (better-get-used-to-it) rationale—the assumption that children are best prepared for unpleasant experiences that may come later by being exposed to a lot of unpleasantness while they're young—makes no sense from a psychological perspective. We may *want* kids to rebound from failure, but that doesn't mean it's usually going to happen—or that the experience of failure makes that desired outcome more likely.

In fact, studies find that when kids fail, they tend to construct an image of themselves as incompetent and even helpless, which leads to more failure. (They also come to prefer easier tasks and lose interest in whatever they're doing.) In one study, students were asked to solve problems that were rigged to ensure failure. Then they were asked to solve problems that were clearly within their capabilities. What happened? Even the latter problems paralyzed them because a spiral of failure had been set into motion. By the same token, if an adult declines to step in and help when kids are frustrated, that doesn't make them more self-sufficient or self-confident: it mostly leaves them feeling less supported, less secure about their own worthiness, and more doubtful about the extent to which the parent or teacher really cares about them.

Have some people experienced failure but then gone on to be wildly successful? Obviously. But things don't work out this way for most people. And even when it does happen, we can't conclude that experience with failure was responsible for the success. (Also, we should be careful to define what we mean by "successful." One can end up rich or famous without being an admirable or psychologically healthy human being.)

In short, there's reason to doubt the popular claim that kids have too little experience with failure. Or that more such experience would be good for them.

ESSAY TOPIC

Alfie Kohn's title—"What Do Kids Really Learn from Failure?"—implies that kids learn something different from failure than what is commonly believed. **According to Kohn, what are the incorrect *and* correct ideas as to what failure teaches kids?** What do you think of Kohn's views? In formulating your response, be sure to use specific examples, which may be based on your experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading, including (of course) "What Do Kids Really Learn From Failure?" itself.