Learning from Mistakes

Many children across the country worry about going to school and there may be various reasons for this anxiety. All children get anxious at times and this is a normal part of their development as they grow up and develop their ‘survival skills’ so they can face challenges in the wider world. However, anxiety which happens often, or at the wrong time, can affect the behaviour and thoughts of the anxious person in negative ways such as not having the confidence to try new things, face challenges or even carry on as normal.

An online article suggests there are ten top reasons why children worry about going to school. Topping the list is the fear of failure. I am troubled to think that children worry about failure. After all, failure is a necessity if we are to learn. Clearly one needs additional attributes to deal with failure, such as perseverance and commitment, but in essence if we never push ourselves we will never know our limits.

Carol Dwek is an American psychologist who has written about mindsets, fixed mental attitudes or dispositions that predetermine a person’s responses to and interpretations of situations. In her book she describes two mindsets, namely the fixed and growth mindsets. She says the idea of trying and still failing - of leaving yourself without excuses - is the worst fear within the fixed mindset. She suggests those with a fixed mindset need to prove they are able, to validate themselves. In some schools the culture often promotes, or at least accepts, the fixed mindset. Indeed parents, and I include myself in this, are sometimes guilty of saying, “Well done, you did that really quickly without making any mistakes.” What message are we sending out to our children? We are suggesting that what we prize is speed and perfection.

However, speed and perfection are the enemy of learning difficult things. By condoning them we encourage children to avoid anything challenging. Conversely in a growth mindset, failure is to be celebrated because the process of learning is just as important, if not more so, than the final product. Success within the growth mindset comes from trying, making mistakes and acknowledging learning from them.

Head of Art, Emma Bell, believes strongly that the actual processes of art, built slowly over time, make for a better artist. She considers getting things wrong and making them right is part of being creative. Bruno Santino, Head of Mathematics, admits he likes children to make mistakes. He would rather see calculations or problem solving tasks with a few errors than a complete page of accurate work. Why? Simply because if everything is correct the child may not have been challenged sufficiently. A page of accurate calculations demonstrates mastery of the skill but may not have challenged potential.

All of this presupposes children are ready to make mistakes. If making mistakes is indeed a prime cause of anxiety in school children, then steps need to be taken in schools to address this. At Yateley Manor we believe education needs to be built upon the foundations of strong relationships. Such connections between staff and children go a
long way to minimise anxiety about making mistakes and maximise learning. I have observed a number of lessons recently where mistakes have been viewed positively and focus on this across the school continues.

The growth mindset is not the sole factor in a child's successful journey through school. However it does engender an attitude of exploration in their learning, a desire to sustain improvement and to achieve the very best possible. We do not want children to be anxious about school and we do not want them to be anxious about life ahead. Building learning power through strong relationships remains a priority at Yateley Manor.

Robert Upton

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