

# The Importance of Failing Well

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A study of intellectually gifted students at a New Zealand high school has revealed one significant factor that distinguishes the highest achievers from the lowest achievers.

This factor was 100% significant – present in all the highest achievers and absent in all the lowest achievers.

This factor was their ability to *fail well*.

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## The Discovery:

From 2006-2008 as part of the requirements for my Masters degree, I was lucky enough to get to work with a wonderful group of GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) students in my local high school. The group included students from all grades, from 13–18 years old, all bright, interesting and interested and a pleasure to work with. My investigation was into any links between their resilience and their academic performance.

Their resilience was gauged using a standard questionnaire approach focused on measuring both their Locus of Control (LOC) and Learned Helplessness (LH) orientations.

During the study all the students sat a major end-of-year examination in their school subjects. Based on their exam results their teachers then classified them into either the High Achiever, Achiever or Underachiever group of students.

My first discovery was that with these students there was no connection at all between their academic success and their resilience. Some helpless, external LOC kids were succeeding well and some resilient, internal LOC kids were bombing out.

My curiosity then led me to control for resilience and look further.

Pairs of students with identical resilience scores were then formed with one member of each pair being from the High Achiever student group and one from the Underachiever student group. The Achiever group of students was taken out of the analysis to help make the extremes more explicit. Five pairs of students were identified in this way

making ten students in total. All ten students were then interviewed and their responses analysed.

Across all five pairs of students the practical strategies and internal characteristics of the High Achievers that were noticeably different from the Underachievers were:

- involvement in extra-curricular activities
- intense interests or passions
- intellectual curiosity, academic engagement, a drive for understanding
- gaining enjoyment from significant challenge
- an active and clear goal focus
- using active strategies to learn from failure
- choosing to succeed.

But it was around the concept of failure that the greatest differences were found.

Failure in this study, was defined as not reaching a goal. Setting a goal, to win a game, to get a certain grade, outcome, performance and then not achieving that goal.

Their responses were very revealing.

While both the High Achievers and the Underachievers had all attributed failure to a lack of effort in their questionnaire data, a noticeable difference between them was elicited from their interview data. The High Achievers all reported actively applying long term effort-based strategies for academic achievement, whereas the Underachievers only reported applying effort in response to immediate deadlines.

Similarly with procrastination, all interviewees reported procrastination to be a problem for them but whereas the High Achievers were actively taking steps to get on top of the problem, the Underachievers were succumbing to it and resorting to last minute urgency to get them through.

The understanding and acceptance of failure was also strongly exhibited by the High Achievers in their interviews in contrast to the Underachievers. The Underachievers tended to deny that failure existed for them or took steps to avoid the possibility of failure in their lives. The one Underachiever who acknowledged failure in his life reported feeling completely overwhelmed by what he saw as the total failure of everything in his life and so rendered himself completely helpless.

The responses to failure reported across the five Underachievers were:

- denying failure

- using ability attributions to explain any setbacks
- using no obvious strategies to reflect on and learn from mistakes
- eliminating any subject or task in which failure was experienced
- avoiding any situations where failure was possible
- believing that every personal action resulted in failure and it was impossible to change
- denying any successes
- focusing on own short-comings
- disengaging from the subject matter
- being content with underachievement.

In comparison the responses reported by the five High Achievers in dealing with failure were:

- using effort based attributions for any failure
- focusing on learning from mistakes
- being adaptable and achieving to the level of personal best
- using hard work, talent and organisation to limit failure
- being prepared to try new strategies and apply more effort
- establishing absolute control in important areas
- using precise goal focus and the application of organisation and effort to minimise failure
- viewing failure as temporary and specific
- taking responsibility for own actions in any failure situation.

Taking my lead from the information security industry I called one response to failure, *failing well* and the other response *failing badly*.

Reaction to failure:

<b><i>Failing Well</i></b>	<b><i>Failing Badly</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging your failures, taking responsibility for your own actions, working out what you did wrong, making changes, and having another go</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blaming the school or the 'system'</li> <li>• Blaming other people</li> <li>• Pretending you never have any failures</li> <li>• Adding drama to failures to avoid dealing with them</li> <li>• Avoiding any activity that could possibly result in failure</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dropping any activity after the first failure</li><li>• Making the same mistake over and over</li><li>• Universalising failure</li></ul>
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My study seemed to suggest three conclusions:

- 1) That maybe there was a direct relationship between *failing well* and academic success for all students not just gifted students
- 2) That it seemed that there was only one way to *fail well* but there were many ways to *fail badly*
- 3) That the idea of *failing well* could create a new model of success. Previously, for any endeavour (goal, plan, task) there were only ever two possible outcomes – success or failure, but with this model there were always three possible outcomes, success, *failing well* and *failing badly*, and two of those were positive.

Which led me in turn to the hypothesis that there was a causal relationship between failing well and academic success. That learning to fail well actually produced academic success.

Then I set out to see if I was right.

### **The Confirmation:**

For the last five years I have worked with many thousands of students, their parents and teachers in 10 different countries testing out this model and the results appears to be consistent across the world:

- Students who *fail well* do better, much better, than students who *fail badly*.
- Teachers who *fail well* do better.
- Parents who *fail well* do better.

The key to it seems to be in the reprocessing of failure.

I suggest the following steps:

- 1) Get over your emotional attachment to the word failure. Failure is just feedback. Feedback on what you aren't doing right yet

- 2) Second, admit every failure – immediately. Remember that the definition of failure is simply not reaching a goal
- 3) Take responsibility for your own actions in not achieving that goal
- 4) Make changes
- 5) Have another go

Take a school situation as a simple example - imagine your child has just sat a Maths test with 10 questions and they have got 6 out of 10 correct.

What do they do with the 4 out of 10 they got wrong?

This is the crucial test.

Children that practice *failing well* will look at the six out of ten they got right and feel OK about that, they passed. And then they will look at the four out of ten they got wrong and ask why. Then they will analyse each question, work out exactly what they did wrong and make corrections and make sure they know how the correct answer was arrived at. Then they will do a couple more problems similar to each one of the ones they got wrong until they are confident they have nailed them all. Then they will put the whole test behind them.

Children that practice *failing badly* will look at the six out of ten and feel OK about that, they passed. Then they will put the whole test behind them.

The secret seems to be in re-working any failure. Making sure you have another go, whatever the situation is, but making sure you change something first.

To help with this both teachers and parents need to reframe the word 'failure' and help children to understand that failure is a necessary part of growth and learning and there are two distinctly different ways to fail.

In the school situation the greatest challenge may well be to de-stigmatise the word failure and to create a classroom climate where children feel safe to fail. Only then will students be able to examine their own reactions to failure and practice building up the skills of failing well.

From now on every task, every goal, every performance has not two but three possible outcomes – *Success*, *Failing Well* and *Failing Badly*, and two of those are positive. By adopting this model you instantly increase the potential for success by one third.

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**Referenced academic paper on this topic available at: <http://taolearn.com/articles/article87.pdf>**

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