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Headline: Let our kids learn from failure

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WHILE we all want our children to succeed, we also need to let our kids experience failure. As hard as it may be, kids need to learn how to cope with disappointment, setbacks and failure, to be resilient.

This isn't about encouraging failure but teaching kids how to bounce back when things go wrong _ and the younger the better.

Today there's a whole new language to describe overprotected, molly-coddled, cotton-wool kids _ and their parents.

Are you a ``helicopter" parent, hovering over your child then swooping in to intervene at the first sign of trouble? Or a ``lawnmower" parent, smoothing over every possible situation that could cause your child stress or discomfort?

Have you come across a ``tea cup" child who so is overprotected and emotionally fragile that they will crack at the first obstacle?

A recent story on over-protected kids in the Huffington Post referred to an Australian study that found 90 per cent of school counsellors and child psychologists had seen incidents of over parenting.

It made me wonder how we'd compare here in New Zealand. Would we be the same? Better? Or even worse?

Resilience is so important in all aspects of life, from dealing with text bullying to managing at university or in the workplace.

But we all know how hard it is to sit back and watch your child fail. Instead, we need to teach our children how to assess risk and work out some harm minimisation strategies.

The Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (who is also a board member of the Families Commission) Sir Peter Gluckman has explored the issue of resilience in young people.

He says that by not allowing children to learn about risks we set adolescents up for a very tough transition to adulthood. Resilience, he says, needs to be instilled in the first five years of life so children can cope with our ever-changing and increasingly complex world.

Today, despite adolescents maturing earlier, they are accepted as adults later than ever. He calls this ``tight-loose parenting" where we overprotect the children, then let teens run wild with few social constraints. In previous generations it was the other way around with ``loose-tight" parenting being the norm.

So what has changed? More protective parenting? Older parents having fewer children? The increased complexity of today's technological society? Or our new awareness that the brain is not fully mature until 25-30 years of age? Compare that with the average age of a midshipman serving with Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar over 200 years ago _ it was just 12 years old.

There's a growing international school of thought that believes failure is good for our collective mental health. In the US and UK there is an increasing call for children to be encouraged to experience failure and learn how to deal with it.

Teachers, parents and academics are starting to explore ways for children and young people to take risks, to understand failure, learn judgment, and the importance of perseverance in success.

One innovative example is Wimbledon Girls High School, a top London school which has introduced Failure Week. They were concerned that some students were over-reacting to failure, instead of seeing it as a key component of future success.

They portray failure as a normal part of life, by discussing how the students felt about failure, using famous people who had overcome failure, and other activities including asking parents and tutors to share tales of their own fails.

Closer to home, a Wellington principal made it clear that he would not accept the tide of notes from parents trying to excuse their primary-aged boys from the annual cross country.

Instead, at the end of the day he told the boys that for some, this was their favourite day of the school year when they would shine. For many, this was the day they'd dread most. He told the boys that this is how life is _ there will be days or weeks and periods when it's not your day and you will struggle, but you will get through it.

I think we should tell our young people that:

Bill Gates' first business failed

Stephen King's first novel was rejected 30 times

Thomas Edison failed 1000 times before creating the lightbulb

Vincent Van Gogh only sold one painting in his lifetime

Jay-Z couldn't get signed to any record labels

Soichiro Honda started out making scooters while he was unemployed after being turned down for a job by Toyota.

How many of our kids would cope with such setbacks?

As a country we also need to be more accepting of failure. It's the other side of the innovation coin _ not only trying new things but not being afraid to say when something isn't working.

This is a problem for government agencies, who are encouraged to innovate and try new things, but face public criticism when they propose to stop funding an unsuccessful programme.

And this is where the Families Commission comes in, and its newly created Social Policy Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (SuPERU). The commission's new role is to increase the use of evidence to improve the lives of New Zealanders.

This includes encouraging a robust and honest evaluation of the billions of dollars spent on social programmes. We've just completed a review of relationship education in schools, and are completing work on effective parenting programmes.

We need to have a better understanding of which programmes work, when and why _ and which don't.

The real skill is to learn from the evidence and come back with a better, stronger idea or policy. And that's a strength we need to instil in our families, communities and decision makers.

As the Irish writer Samuel Beckett said, "Try again, fail again, fail better". Or as I prefer, "Fail fast and learn quickly."

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Business and civic leaders, organisers, experts in their field and interest groups can contribute opinions. Email: editor@hbtoday.co.nz