Youth
Development

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A MONOGRAPH OF THE 4-H CENTER FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

The Value of Failure in Middle Childhood

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MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Elementary school-aged children are generally in a phase of development called middle childhood. Since developmental phases are not synonymous with age, some youth in elementary school are focused on issues other than what will be described. Near the end of middle childhood, particularly during the fifth and sixth grades, children are typically transitioning into adolescence. The focus of this monograph is on middle childhood as a developmental phase.

A defining context of this period of development is the school setting and the expectations of the "boss" of this child work setting—the teacher. By first grade children are expected to be ready to learn "work" habits and "work" related skills that will prepare them to be fully functioning, productive members of a literate society. The issues of requirements pertaining to achievement are reiterated in organized youth activities in the community and in the family setting, which is the nucleus or control center of a child's development. As children learn the rules of our society, they become extremely interested in issues of "fairness." This issue of fairness is seen in the classroom with peers and teachers, on the playground and in the community with peers and referees, and at home with siblings and parents.

By first grade children are expected to use language socially, have a well developed fantasy life, be filled with curiosity, and have begun (but not fully achieved) self-control and self-management. These latter skills include being able to stop and think of possible ways around obstacles that are blocking a goal; to focus on a task and disregard irrelevant thoughts, sights, and sounds; to control emotions when goal–oriented activities are blocked; to weigh future consequences when deciding how to act; and to engage in more than one task at a time, as long as those tasks are not

incompatible or highly complex (Maccoby, 1980).

In middle childhood, these early achievements are extended. In particular, children make major strides in achieving increasingly complex goals that require sustained attention and organization. They are increasingly able to organize multifaceted assignments and sustain their attention on these goals despite distracting thoughts, sights, sounds, and interruptions necessary to complete other requirements of the day (Sroufe, Cooper, & DeHart, 1996). Children become able to hold more than one activity or dimension in mind even when the mental activities are complex and seemingly contradictory. Part way into middle childhood, typically by fourth grade, children are not only expected to be able to read but to learn from reading also. While teachers and parents are still important to children in their learning activities, children who are developmentally on target are becoming increasingly independent in their ability to learn, organize, remember, and think about their strategies for pursuing their goals. It is a period of transition from needing adult support for greater autonomous functioning to children's accepting personal responsibility for their achievements. Children have a need to know now that they are able to achieve on their own, even when adult help or monitoring is needed along the way.

ONGOING NEED FOR SUPPORT AND AUTONOMY

Children in middle childhood need a sense of autonomous achievement as well as clear support and supervision from adults in relation to achievement. To provide children with support and opportunities for development of autonomy, parents need to provide both *support and challenge* to children. As children are ready to take on more challenging responsibilities at home and school, it is important to continuously evaluate what creates the best balance of supports and challenges for each particular child. The specific balance of optimal support and challenge reflects a dynamic process that changes in accordance with the child's own progress relative to successes and “failures.” Unfortunately, there are no guidelines regarding how many “grams of support” and how many “grams of challenge" a child needs each day. Not only is there no established amount of support and challenge that children need each day, it is also the simultaneous need for support and challenge that makes it difficult for parents to balance.

Setting limits and standards of conduct *without* providing ongoing parental nurturance has been linked to child noncompliance and other negative outcomes, such as a tendency for the child to blame others for negative outcomes (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Sroufe et al., 1996; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). Similarly, providing nurturance and support *without* also setting firm limits and demands for maturity that the child accepts as fair does not appear to prepare children to be socially responsible and academically successful (Baumrind, 1967, 1977; Becker, 1964; Sroufe, et al., 1996). Providing continued support *and* challenge (e.g., gradually raising and maintaining standards of performance) to children is work and is more difficult than establishing a parenting style that focuses on simply one dimension or another (e.g., parental support/permissiveness versus parental power assertion). Nonetheless, research has consistently found the value of parents setting *firm, reasonable limits* and *demands for increasing maturity* when they are administered within the context of

nurturing, responsive parenting in terms of social responsibility and school achievement (Baumrind, 1967, 1977). While children are being given standards of performance at school and at home, parents need to be nurturant and supportive from the children's perspective *and* at the same time to validate and hold firm to the importance of meeting the reasonable standards set by caring adults.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF SENSE OF INDUSTRY AND SENSE OF INFERIORITY

School-aged children are making great strides in finding their place in the world of work that leads to a more complex sense of who they are as individuals. To do this, children focus on the psychological issues we call *"industry"* and *"sense of inferiority"* (Erikson, 1950, 1964).

These two issues are focused on achievement. During middle childhood, children are focused on learning how to accomplish things. This is true at school, at home, and in activities away from home and school (e.g., informal play with peers, organized sports, arts and crafts programs, and youth groups). Children want to do more than simply explore now; they want to complete things to show accomplishments. Children are developing a sense of self that is increasingly based on achievements. A clear identity is not established in middle childhood, but children do increasingly differentiate who they are and how they are different from others in accordance with achievement experiences.

At school children typically want to be among the first to finish or do better than some others in the class. At home they want to have complete collections (e.g., sets of baseball cards; magic cards; the whole set of a particular book series such as *Goosebumps*). They want to win at games and will often keep track of their winnings over a series of games. While earlier on they want to explore the kinds of things they can do, in middle childhood they want to achieve and finish things. For example, prior to middle childhood, just learning how to manipulate video games is the thrill, but during middle childhood, finishing all the levels of a game or being able to achieve the same high levels as their friends becomes important. At organized activities (e.g., Cub Scouts, 4-H, soccer leagues, or Little League baseball), children value mementos of their accomplishments (such as badges, sports trophies, ribbons, or pictures of teams as winners). Private lessons (e.g., piano lessons, trombone lessons, or ballet dance lessons) are particularly challenging since accomplishments in these areas take considerable time and require discipline in organizing one's time at home outside of the lessons. These activities again provide children with a measure of their ability to accomplish what they set out to do. During middle childhood, school concerts, talent shows, art displays, and recitals are some of the avenues through which children have dramatic and concrete validation of these skills. The value of these activities and mementos is that they are concrete events or objects that attest to accomplishments. Children are developing an image that they can achieve in the world—for example, in the domains of work, performing arts, sports, or personal choices—and concrete validation is in keeping with the kind of logic that children in middle childhood most commonly use to make judgments.

It is important that this sense of industry is coupled with some sense of inferiority. A limited sense of inferiority in some areas of achievement and appreciation of the talents

of others, when experienced in conjunction with a pride in one's achievements in other domains of achievement, is valuable to healthy functioning. This sense of inferiority is frequently generated when children engage in social comparison, gauging their own accomplishments or progress in the light of how much or how well other children achieve. Social comparison goes on daily once children enter school and are expected to achieve. It occurs when parents or teachers make comparisons between one child and another (sibling or peer). It also occurs independent of overt teacher/parent comparisons. Children make social comparisons on their own, even when parents and teachers wish they would not or think the comparison is not meaningful (Crockenberg & Bryant, 1979). Social comparisons go on in most areas of accomplishments during middle childhood. Children compare their grades with others in the classroom and with those of their siblings. Social comparison processes are a dominant feature of middle childhood. Besides social comparison, children can experience a sense of inferiority by simply failing to reach a goal, independent of whether other children do or do not pursue and reach the same goal.

Learning that one is not perfect, yet still loved and accepted, has long been considered important for long-term well-being (Moustakas, 1959). Learning to deal with "failure" or reasonably challenging standards of achievement helps children be prepared to persist when achievement is not immediately forthcoming. Failure need not impact on a child's sense of his or her own value. Parents can help children turn "failures" into "setbacks" or opportunities for redefining goals. The value of giving children challenging experiences, tasks for which immediate mastery is not possible, is the preparation it gives children to learn how to proceed in light of failure. This requires parents to be there to support their children's struggle with "failures" (setbacks). Without struggling for mastery in some areas, children will not be prepared to constructively deal with failure or the frustrations of complex problems that come their way later in life.

Thus, a central theme in middle childhood is the need for achievements with concrete validation of accomplishments and some setback experiences that provide some self-doubt. In Erikson's (1950, 1964) framework, these failure experiences are important to provide a meaningful basis for humility with others and to provide opportunities for learning how to turn failure into a meaningful experience that enhances functioning (e.g., to view failure as simply a setback). Easy mastery throughout the day at school and home, day after day, is problematic to development in the sense that children will not learn the value of self-doubt nor understand the process of turning failure into setbacks. On the other hand, repeated failure in an area of functioning on a daily basis is problematic because self-doubt needs to be balanced with daily achievement, success, and nurturance to support the notion that the child is a capable individual. Failure is of value to the extent that it is simply a setback on the road to achievement, even if there needs to be a detour or change of avenue to locate success. Parents can play an important role in helping children have valuable experiences as a result of their failures. Considerations for how to support children through failure experiences will be explored in the following sections.

WHAT IS "FAILURE"?

Not meeting demands and expectations of important others, such as parents and

teachers, is one kind of failure. Avoiding work and doing work in a sloppy or incomplete fashion are also forms of failure. In contrast, children may be objectively succeeding in the eyes of others, while their personal, subjective evaluation may be one of failure. Both objective and subjective standards for success are relevant to children in middle childhood (Bryant, 1983). Parents and teachers need to establish genuine, objective standards and also need to monitor children's own interpretations of success. School-aged children need to learn the standards that parents and teachers set, and parents and teachers need to understand children's current norms. Part of helping a child handle failure is for the adult to know when objective and subjective failure are occurring.

THE VALUE OF FAILURE

Failure is a critical component of an excellent developmental environment. It is at moments of failure that parents can help children discover that failure can be useful feedback upon which one needs to make adjustments and persist until success is achieved.

Concerns about failure in academic achievement, lack of achievement in sports and youth groups, failure in achieving at home (e.g., homework, chores, responsibilities), and failure in peer relations have revolved around doubts that a child will be successful as an adult if he or she cannot achieve now in accordance with culture's standards of performance in childhood. Further concern comes with how a child can sustain blows to self-esteem when self-esteem is viewed as the underlying basis for future success. This American concern about the value of self-esteem is reflected in cross-national research. Zill (1979) found that American parents, more than their French and Japanese counterparts, were reluctant to do anything that would undermine their children's self-esteem. American parents (and teachers) did not actively encourage and require academic achievement on a day-to-day basis, as was the case for children in these other countries. What appears to have been forgotten by these American parents is that concern for self-esteem is warranted when it serves children's developmental progress, not when it replaces real achievement. How has this happened?

How can we take account of children's need for self-esteem without compromising real achievement? Consider first what success is later in life. Work success in adulthood is related to performance skills, the ability to take responsibility, the ability to work cooperatively with peers, and the ability to sustain effort in light of setbacks (i.e., failures). The value of failure during middle childhood is two-fold: first, it teaches children adult standards of conduct and product, and second, it provides children with the opportunity to learn that failure does not need to affect their self-esteem even though it may impact on their choice of strategies and goals.

Failure experiences need to be considered for their potential role in long term success in personal, academic, and interpersonal domains. Failure is a form of stress, and basic theories of child development (Erikson, 1950, 1964; Piaget, 1952/1963) have historically viewed stress as fundamental to developmental progress. Many researchers have not kept true to these basic developmental assumptions and instead have distinguished failure from success (e.g., differing peer status styles such as rejected versus popular). In so doing, failure has become viewed as "to be avoided" for good developmental

functioning. By designing developmental studies that view failure as part of a process, not an end point, we can learn more about its value.

The traditional response to helping children with failure has focused on skill training programs. Effective social skill training programs have been the hope of many researchers and clinicians interested in promoting satisfying peer relations among children (Schneider, Rubin, & Ledingham, 1985). Despite some success in developing social skill training programs to enhance peer relations, Asher (1985) notes two current limitations to our present efforts: (a) Even the most successful programs leave 40% to 50% of the children unaffected by the training; and (b) Interventions are less successful in changing experiences involving peer friendship choices (reflected in peer nominations) than experiences of peer acceptance (reflected in peer ratings of peers). The need to cope implies that one does not have the skills at the present time required to meet one's goals. Our past view of social skills per se as the "cure-all" for sustained well-being needs to be reconsidered and balanced with the need to consider the value of coping with failure in between successes.

With respect to sustained academic success, Dweck (1978, 1990) has demonstrated the *value of failure experiences for sustained achievement*. Underlying sustained achievement are cognitive evaluations of failures that focus on unstable, internal mechanisms (e.g., need for more effort; need for a change in strategy used to solve a problem). In other words, failure needs to be met with a perception that one needs to work harder and organize one's effort more systematically. Parents and other adults can help children learn how to interpret and make constructive changes in response to failure. In this model, failure is seen as a setback rather than an indication of a lack of ability per se. Patterns of adult feedback that focus on providing praise for successes while ignoring failure are not effective in helping children persist when faced with failure (Dweck, 1978). Unfortunately, this research indicates that success without setbacks breeds further success only if failure isn't introduced or with continuing parental dispensing of rewards for success. Adults who fail to set clear standards or genuine feedback when failure occurs are limiting the child's ability to achieve in the long-term, in the absence of a constant parent/teacher coach. Helping children to learn how to cope with failure in ways that lead to sustained effort and/or change of strategies breeds both success in "good times" (when no setbacks are encountered) as well as "bad times" (when setbacks are encountered).

A series of long-term successes dotted by setbacks is more relevant to work and social well-being throughout life than is a series of successes with no experiences of setback. Parents can view all kinds of "failures" as opportunities to help their children grow stronger by working through setbacks. Parenting requires a good understanding of the role of failure for their children's development, because of the importance of working through challenges and learning to value failure experiences despite the discomforts they bring. This is particularly true in middle childhood because achievement plays so prominently in the psychological meaning of life events during this period of development.

COPING STRATEGIES: HELPING CHILDREN TURN FAILURES INTO SETBACKS

Coping generally refers to the cognitive and behavioral effort expended to master, tolerate, or reduce demands that tax or exceed the individual's resources (Cohen & Lazarus, 1979; Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Altering a problem directly, changing one's way of viewing a problem, and managing emotional distress aroused by a problem are three major dimensions along which coping can take place (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Kessler, et al., 1985). The literature on coping presents a model for interpreting behavior that is a response to emotional distress. An individual who is coping with distress is viewed as playing an active role in construing his or her own psychological world and in utilizing resources to manage stress or to modify problematic aspects of his or her environment. A coping model gives considerable power to both the parent and the child in their individual and mutual struggles.

There are no clear dicta as to the best coping strategies. What we do know is that coping efforts that may be successful in one domain might have no effect, or be detrimental, in others (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). For example, direct action (e.g., "Redo this chore correctly.") may or may not be the most effective immediate method of dealing with children who balk at completing family chores. Direct action may be successful when approaching a chore of moderate difficulty for the child but not so successful when approaching a chore of enormous difficulty. In the latter situation, addressing the child's frustration can be followed by focused direct action (e.g., "This is really hard for you, isn't it? Let's see if we can find another strategy for you to use when you redo this chore.").

It should be recognized that children often employ coping strategies that actually exacerbate the very problems that they are designed to solve (Kessler et al., 1985). Parents are subject to the same faulty behaviors. In fact, Pearlin and Schooler (1978) found that more than 40% of the strategies employed by adults to deal with chronic role strains were actually related to greater role stress. When coping is exacerbating failure for children, it is often the case that the child gets labeled in counterproductive ways (e.g., "irresponsible" or "lazy").

Parent and child coping that can maintain individuals in their roles actively engaged in problem solving is desirable. It is advisable to recognize that "lazy" children are engaging in coping maneuvers and the basis for the "laziness" needs to be given some regard. Since there is no single best coping strategy, the more varied a child's coping repertoire, the more protected he or she is from distress. This holds for parents and children alike and holds for individuals with chronic as well as acute problems. Children's development often suffers when responses to failure are not viewed as part of an ongoing process requiring multiple coping strategies coupled with sustained effort to find long-term success.

Both parents and children want success in the family. From a coping model, it is only ineffective coping strategies that prevent this from happening. It is important to recognize that disruptive and otherwise noncompliant children are engaging in coping maneuvers. Remember, coping strategies are not successful in all situations. While recognizing that children are engaging in meaningful behavior inasmuch as they are trying to manage some form of failure, parents can help children recognize that a current coping strategy is not effective in a given situation, *and* then parents can redirect children to consider other possible coping

strategies. Accepting children's problematic behavior as coping behavior does not mean that children should not be held to standards of conduct. Instead, this conceptualization can help parents see that their child is not simply being disobedient to spite a parent, but rather the child needs help from a parent to apply greater effort or change his or her strategy to successfully complete the task at hand.

Sharing the Stress: The Case for Using Cooperative Goal Structures

To the extent that families define themselves as cooperative units, the success of any individual affects the success of all family members. If families use an individualistic goal structure, an individual child's achievement has virtually no impact on other family members. When families are defined in terms of a competitive goal structure, an individual child's achievement is inversely related to the achievement of other family members.

Despite the value of cooperative goal structures, *myths* abound in middle-class, Caucasian North American culture that prevent parents from considering the value of cooperative goals structures. The parents in this middle-class cultural group place great emphasis on fostering autonomy and independence in their children (Grusec, Hastings, & Mammone, 1994), and their lack of understanding that the development of autonomy and independence can flourish in cooperative settings is related to their reluctance to embrace the potential of cooperative goal structures. Johnson and Johnson (1975, 1989) outline cultural myths that limit our use of cooperative structures. First, middle class Americans generally view that our society is basically competitive. This contradicts the fact that most human interaction in our society is cooperative, not competitive. Even during wars and other combative activities, cooperative agreements exist to set parameters on how the conflict will be conducted. (Acts of terrorism violate the cooperative agreements of conflict.) Second, there is the myth that achievement, success, drive, ambition, and motivation depend on successfully competing with others. Cooperative groups can succeed or fail just as competitive individuals can succeed or fail. Third, there is a myth that competition builds character despite research evidence that fails to verify this relationship (Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971). While participation in competitive athletics may provide opportunity to build character, it apparently provides equal opportunity to limit character development.

Johnson and Johnson (1975, 1989) provide a thorough review of empirical data that compare the consequences of using cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures. By employing cooperative goal structures, parents help children from being either alienated from the work of others (as in individualistic structures) or antagonistic to the achievement of others (as in competitive structures).

Defining the family as a cooperative is beneficial to children *and* parents in providing support during times when failure (of even one member) is being experienced. Under cooperative goal structures, persons are more likely to experience genuine concern about their own progress and the progress of others, be it success or failure. Individual responsibility can be part of cooperative projects; failure to take responsibility is met with shared distress by all family members and includes family support for overcoming the failures.

In competitive goal structures, persons learn that others are against their success and have a vested interest in knowing or contributing to some degree of their failure to obtain superior achievement. In individualistic goal structures, persons learn that others don't necessarily care about them, including their successes or failures. When parents are in competition with their children, any parental demand is suspected of weakening the child's position. When parents use an individualistic approach with their children, the lack of connectedness does not lend itself to setting group norms and this limits parental authority in family functioning.

Behaviors and skills necessary for successful cooperative group functioning include what have been called group maintenance functions (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). These maintenance functions refer to maintaining good feelings among all group members and sharing the stress of impending failure. In contrast, it is often to the competitor's advantage if one can throw off the opponent's emotional equilibrium or raise the opponent's level of self-doubt and self-incrimination. Finally, not caring about another's emotional status is characteristic of those participating in individualistic work environments. In other words, having everyone feel good about themselves is clearly needed in group work; in competitive situations, one gains pleasure primarily at the expense of others' failure; and in individualistic situations, no one needs to care about the emotional life of others. These are characteristics of dysfunctional families (Minuchin, 1974).

That successes and failures affect the parent is more evident in cooperative goal structures. Sharing vulnerability is a form of support. This vulnerability can be countered by a parental display of strength and optimism about the children' capabilities for future successes. Parental commitment to children can be the implicit or explicit demand for achievement and resilience (cf. Murphy, 1974). Children in families where children and parents form a team can come away with respect for individual talents, a sense of responsibility for completing assignments and chores as part of making an effective family, and an awareness of individual and family abilities to achieve when confronted with challenging problems.

Individuals in cooperative relationships have been found to be more accepting of each other than are individuals in a competitive relationship. Fostering acceptance of others and their difficulties will be easier in a cooperatively structured learning environment (Dunn & Goldman, 1966). Cooperative goal structures allow children the opportunity to encounter people with differing attitudes, experiences, insights, standards for achievement, level of academic competence, and approaches to work. In the process, they will be more likely to learn differing coping skills for two reasons: First, they will see and be aware of a variety of coping strategies, since cooperative children are better at social perspective taking than are competitive children (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Second, they will see the benefits or find other coping strategies enjoyable in conjunction with group support and/or success.

Strategies for helping parents cope effectively with children's and their own failure or stress are integral to developing a family environment that promotes effective coping among its children. Developing a family culture of helping among children themselves and between parents and children coupled with an understanding of the value of working through stresses is a starting point. Coping strategies learned in a

cooperative work group best mirror the coping strategies required in the adult world of work since research has shown that success after school is best predicted by how well a person can work with others rather than the extent of the individual's academic achievement (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980).

The Pleasure-Pain Balance: The Need for Family Fun

Changing the pain-pleasure balance, both through reduction of pain by soothing and by the increase of pleasure through fun, love, work, and narcissistic reward has been found useful in accounting for resiliency in children (Murphy, 1974). Recognizing the importance of finding pleasure and feeling free to do so appears particularly difficult for children who are holding a parent or a family "together" at home. Children from stressful home situations who appear well-adjusted and highly achieving at school—called *superkids* by Byrne (1980) and *responsible children* by Black (1979)—can be viewed as at risk for further coping when taking responsibility and control for others is not wanted. Parents often do not see the harm being done to their child when they give their child a parenting role because the child is doing "so well" in other domains. Parents need to know to assess whether or not their child is able to express his/her wants and needs and whether the child can have occasions of being "a bit problematic." Earning regard from others for being responsible, these children can be particularly vulnerable to lacking a healthy sense of narcissism. In particular, these children too often "miss out on childhood," which means they fail to experience their own needs and wishes as important and fail to develop coping strategies that involve being a bit light-hearted, egocentric, irresponsible, dependent, or even naughty (Brenner, 1984). This has particular implications for satisfying peer relations. Allowing oneself pleasure as well as responsibility can enhance one's coping repertoire and advance long term success in peer relations as well as sustained satisfaction with work demands. In other words, while learning to be responsible is important, it should not be at the expense of experiencing the value of being a bit "selfish" and carefree.

Humor is one form of adding pleasure to an event and relieving the pain of tension. Seeking out pleasurable activities is valuable for both interpersonal and academic success. In fact, the ability to initiate positive experiences may be just as important to an individual's long-term mental health as the ability to cope with negative ones (Kessler et al., 1985). Learning how to initiate and participate in pleasurable moments and events, particularly at times of disappointment, can be part of a coping agenda in the family. Healthy narcissism includes feeling good about oneself, wanting good for oneself, and feeling entitled to it (Murphy, 1974). Taking time to have fun with parents and siblings, particularly during periods of struggle, contributes to healthy strategies for feeling better and readying family members for hard work.

Pleasure is not a substitute for failure but can contribute to the stamina needed for attaining more mature levels of achievement. Pleasure is needed to help balance out pain, just as support is needed to balance out challenge. There is value in regular opportunities (fleeting and sustained) of family fun. There can be rituals of fun (e.g., family nights) and spontaneous spurts of fun. Taking fun breaks from work can be used in the service of long-term achievement.

The Importance of Experiencing a Range of Emotions

While we may applaud as mastery one's maintaining expressions of distress within manageable bounds during a crisis, this may not always be desirable (Kessler et al., 1985). Kessler et al. report findings from one study of adjustment of spinal cord injured patients to chronic stress. Those patients who expressed the most distress about their disability were later judged as progressing farther in rehabilitation. This suggests that emotional distress may motivate other coping efforts, and those actually facing their distress may experience more distress than those avoiding a stress (Kessler et al., 1985). Thus, a child who is expressing distress because of failure in some aspect of academic or interpersonal achievement may, in the long run, be better off giving accurate acknowledgment of difficulty than withholding or denying feelings. This requires a tolerance, or better yet, acceptance and valuing of expressions of distress as part of long-term effective coping. This may be particularly true of chronic stress conditions such as those involving long-term and pronounced learning disabilities.

Other evidence of the value of displaying one's emotions indicates that tolerance for frustration may be a much overrated capacity (Murphy, 1974). Murphy and Moriarty (1976) report that the capacity to protest or to terminate unwanted stimulation at an early age was significantly linked with later active coping with the environment. Skill development in the expression of frustration, anger, and resentment may serve to clarify a situation for others, may help others see that stress can be viewed as meaningful, can cause stress in relationships but also provide the basis for repair of ruptured friendships or working relations (e.g., allow someone to apologize). Frustration tolerance may best be viewed as desirable under certain conditions where sustained coping effort is required in reaching a long-term goal and the lack of tolerance for frustrations may be beneficial if help is forthcoming. "Using" frustration rather than "losing to" frustration may be a more useful way of viewing such events. Having others recognize one's needs and offer assistance is a part of effective coping in some situations.

Attempts to deny an individual's distress through distraction or rationalization are often viewed as annoying and unhelpful (Wortman & Lehman, 1984). It must be considered that people (parents and children alike) may find it difficult to tolerate distress experienced by another and, as a consequence, try to minimize or deny that distress, thereby making the distressed individual feel more isolated. The value of experiencing and expressing the distress coupled with others' ability to tolerate actual expressions of distress may be an important component of effective coping. This valuing of expressing emotions can be coordinated with children's documented acquisition during middle childhood of learning to withhold the expression of feelings to avoid, early on, embarrassment and derision from others and to be, later on, the basis for revenge and deceit (Saarni, 1979). Free expression of true feelings is viewed by children in middle childhood as appropriate when in the presence of friends. Thus, it is important to the development of useful coping strategies that children function in a family atmosphere where parents are seen as allies.

The use of cooperative goal structures have been found to generate friendships and foster the development of the capacity for feeling a variety of emotions at wide levels

of intensity (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Understanding the value of expressing emotions can aid a parent in valuing such expressions as a valuable component in a child's coping repertoire rather than devaluing these expressions. Being heard in a frustrating situation may enable a child to move on to more productive problem solving strategies. Parents and children alike can be the listeners if they recognize the underlying value of such expressions.

Capacity for Struggle

The capacity for struggle includes, among other things, the constructive use of anxiety and aggression and the confidence that one "can put up with a lot" (Murphy, 1974). A positive attitude toward hard work and the desire to take on challenging tasks has been linked to high long-term achievement (Helmich, Spence, Beane, Lucker, & Matthews, 1980). An analysis of *cognitive delimiting* of stress and self-confidence following failure are two major ways of determining or guiding the development of capacity for struggle in school children.

Cognitive delimiting of stress has to do with the child's interpretation of experience. Finding meaning in stressful life experiences has been associated with more effective coping (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). For example, "I must struggle to master important, real-life problems." Controversy and intellectual conflict can be distressing, but they are important components to complex problem solving. Cognitively circumscribing stress is another cognitive approach to delimiting stress. Examples of such interpretations may be: "I have difficulty dividing fractions but I can add and subtract with fractions quite easily," or "I have difficulty with providing comic relief when I get stressed by deadlines but I am very good at bringing a group back to the specific problem we are working on." Viewing conflict as inherent to reaching the most effective solution is a cognitive factor in delimiting the impact of stress inherent in complex problem solving. Finally, viewing failure as part of the process of attaining high academic achievement means that not only is failure compatible with successful attainment of goals, but also that failure—when followed by increased persistence, task interest, task preference, and task resumption—leads to successful task performance at the highest possible level of difficulty (Clifford, 1984).

Confidence, the expectation and trust in future gratification, the desire to "grow up big and strong," and the lack of fatalism all lead to the capacity to entertain fantasies of future gratification, believe the fantasies, work toward them, and make one's wishes or goals come true (cf. Clifford, 1984; Kessler et al., 1985; Murphy, 1974). Research on the existence of confidence following failure experiences has indicated that unstable but internal strategies are most effective in helping one cope constructively with failure (Dweck, 1978). This work has found that attributing one’s succcess or failure as being due to effort (an unstable, internal characteristic) rather than ability (a stable, internal characteristic) leads to more sustained effort following failure. Unfortunately, however, a simple translation of identifying all failure as due to insufficient effort poses several problems in the school setting: (1) Not all errors or failures are due to lack of effort; (2) Effort attributions can lead to harsh judgments from others (e.g., parents, teachers may label the child lazy); (3) Effort attributions for failure are often associated with feelings of guilt (Clifford, 1984). Clifford (1984) proposes using a choice of strategy error to explain failure, with strategy meaning a method for solving a problem. In this way

the use of strategy would be less stable than ability but more stable than effort. Strategy explanations for failure would mean that children would work to delineate what strategies work and what strategies do not work for particular kinds of problems. Such attributions should avoid guilt, shame, and derogation of ability, but at the same time spur the individual on to search for the more effective strategy to solve the particular problem. Failure would become a signal for more problem-solving (Clifford, 1984).

Flexibility

Flexibility involves both cognitive and emotional aspects of coping. Flexibility is an important component of coping and refers to the ability to modulate one's distribution of effort and affect (Murphy, 1974). To be able to feel differently in response to new perceptual structuring, to be able to see things differently, to be able to modify defenses, and to be able to change one's values are all important components in developing the capacity to change (Murphy, 1974). Flexibility has been found predictive of resiliency in adolescents who have grown up under circumstances that promote the development of disorders (Losel & Bliesener, 1994). A lack of flexibility in choice of coping strategies has been identified as a risk factor for young children with disabilities aged 4-34 months (Williamson, Gordon, Zeitlin, & Szczepanski, 1989). Conditions that foster consideration of multiple perspectives and willingness to accept new solutions foster flexibility. Using cooperatively structured situations (the family has shared goals) for complex problem solving provides a context in which diversity of ideas and information can flourish. This is important because the creativity needed for complex problem solving depends upon the presence of controversy and divergent thinking within a group (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). In this context, differences of opinions and experiences are positively valued since multiple perspectives enhance complex problem solving (Johnson & Johnson, 1972) and flexibility in coping while problem solving is maximized.

Making Use of Support

The need for emotional support versus structural support is also at issue here. Research indicates that emotional support may be more critical than structural support (i.e., support through involvement in organized activities) for diminishing the impact of stressful events (Kessler et al., 1985). Having someone hear about one's worries, sadnesses, and fears are examples of receiving emotional support. In addition, a broad-based support system or at least the perception that one has broad-based support that could be mobilized if needed is characteristic of individuals (both adults and children) who fare better than individuals without such support (Bryant, 1985; Kessler et al., 1985). Family norms fostering expressions of vulnerability without cost to the individual and norms fostering listening with an accepting ear are thus desirable. This psychological safety is most likely to occur in cooperative settings where the psychological welfare of individuals is interdependent. Trust is the foundation of emotional intimacy. Deutsch (1958, 1960, 1962) and others have found that trust is built through cooperative interaction and destroyed through competitive interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Families interested in building trusting, intimate relationships in the family can define themselves in terms of cooperative goal structures and avoid competitive ones.

In addition, the actual supportiveness of particular behaviors may depend on who

provides them. Accepting emotional support appears more likely when support is offered by someone who has experienced the same distress than when offered by someone who is well-meaning but has no direct experience (Wortman & Lehman, 1984). The majority of persons who experience life crises rarely turn to professionals for help but rather turn to family, friends and neighbors (Belle, 1989; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). In addition, studies with children indicate that involvement with informal sources of support is more beneficial than formal sources (Bryant, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982). Grandparents, pets, and caring neighbors provide examples of informal sources of support. Parents can value the availability of informal sources of support by allowing their children access to them.

Attempts to provide support and help are sometimes experienced as unhelpful by the recipients (Fisher, Nadler, & DePaulo, 1983). Providing help may be viewed as attempts to control, which is quite distinct from caring. Research with normal children indicates that prosocial development is more characteristic of children whose mothers are responsive to their bids for help and attention but unrelated to the actual amount of help and attention provided by mothers (Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980). This implies the need to wait for requests of help and support as well as the need for children to know how to—and feel free to—ask for help and support. Distinguishing between help asked for from help not asked for (i.e., may not be wanted) represents an important social strategy for parents and children alike. Developing family norms, then, whereby one checks out whether help or support is wanted, enhances the probability that help is offered under conditions of acceptance.

Monitoring the Cost of Chosen Coping Strategies: Coping with Distress in Ways Not Costly to Self and Others

Giving support in ways that does not prove unduly costly to getting one's own needs met is another important consideration of successful coping (Belle, 1982). Being called upon as a caregiver at the expense of being given care must be considered (Kessler et al., 1985). Competent children, including well-liked children, must have their needs identified as part of the schooling agenda.

Having a strong and continual need to control and manipulate others' behavior or expressing seemingly insatiable dependency needs and demandingness are coping styles not uncommon among children surviving a family with alcoholic parents. Unfortunately, these coping styles evoke anger or disinterest from others (Brenner, 1984). In other words, some coping strategies turn away potential providers of support.

Humor is often called upon in times of stress, and too often this humor is at the expense of another person. Learning rules of humor such as making the joke about another person so exaggerated that it cannot be mistaken as an attack is part of effective coping with humor. When humor is hurtful to another, it is called teasing. Revealing that teasing occurs when the teaser is upset is a clinical intervention that parents and peers can use to reduce the use of future teasing attacks that can supplement the development of skilled displays of humor. Humor can also be a source of tension release and a valuable group maintenance activity (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Use of humor that is not costly to others can be an important aid in developing success over time.

It is valuable to help children learn to monitor and value the cost of their present coping strategies to themselves and others. Since coping implies a lack of knowledge as to how to automatically produce success, parents can help children to evaluate and monitor the cost of their ongoing choices of coping strategies.

SUMMARY

In sum, this author argues that skills, while important, are not sufficient to describe the basis for long-term success in either social or academic domains. Strategies for continued striving when meeting failure, or when the path to success is not clear, are commonplace but critical components of success throughout life. Successful individuals, regardless of domain of endeavor, do not succeed in every attempt. They are considered successful not because they've never experienced failures, but because they turn their failures into setbacks. Understanding the process of long term success as it occurs in daily life, and the way it incorporates the experience of failure, will require researchers and parents to rethink the meaning of failure and the role of coping mechanisms.

Parents need a varied coping repertoire for preparing children to manage setbacks over time in work and family settings. Explicitly defining the family as a cooperative unit can set the stage for providing ongoing support while children are being challenged to achieve and develop themselves as industrious citizens. Middle childhood is an important developmental phase in which these lifelong issues are addressed.

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Acknowledgments: The author thanks Sarah Dutton for her constructive feedback on an early draft of this manuscript. Gratitude is also extended to Marc Braverman for his editorial advice in the final stages of developing this manuscript.

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