

Tolerating failure: The paradoxical path towards success



Since our childhood we're often taught to avoid 'failure'. It is painted as the absolute worst. The opposite of success. The opposite of our most cherished ideal(s). While this may not apply to every household or academic system, for most of us – children, adolescents and adults ... failure can often feel catastrophic. It is my assertion that in order to savour success we must first facilitate children in building a relationship with failing. This also opens up a dialogue on what is it about the definition of success that many a times precipitates more breakdowns than a forward movement? Can we tolerate being ordinary? This and many other questions will be explored in this writing.

Born out of the stories that I get to hear in my interaction with children and adults alike; I find it safe to say that any definition of failure or any attempt to propel someone towards it, is incomplete before we teach our children how to tolerate failure. Parents often fixate on the F or O in the report card. They often worry about how it'll reflect on their parenting. The tutor will attribute it to the child again. Teachers are aghast. We get so caught up on these superficial (but nevertheless

important) things that we fail to see the point it is trying to make. If we read failure beyond our moral outrage one can speculate that a child's failure can be very shameful, but not for the child as much as the many people who are threatened to be exposed by it!

If only we can objectively distance ourselves sufficiently from it and engage with it as one would with any other social/emotional phenomena ... failure can open up various issues – systemic, emotional, parental and so on along with what needs attention. Sadly, sometimes failure is often the only language in which a child communicates that helps them get the attention they're looking for. However, we miss the

point because the focus becomes on eradication instead of communication or understanding. This then also calls for a collective reflection on failure's transformative potential.

Can the same failure that we're so averse to also herald transformation? Can we engage with the phenomena of failure metaphorically, philosophically and sometimes literally when you put marks/exams into the mix as a communicative symbol? Part of being a human is to also experience failure from time to time. It is not a reflection of our deficit as much as a testimony to our humanity. As opposed to creating **failure averse children** can we say that our pedagogies and parenting styles birth resilience in children? Can they survive their own mistakes which they will inevitably make? This extends beyond the realm of academics One has to think why an academically brilliant student collapses in the face of lesser marks as an example to substantiate the phenomena. We wonder why can such a brilliant child find dealing with less marks so painful? This intolerance in the child towards ordinariness is also a reflection our intolerance.

When we paint words like mediocre and ordinary in horrible colours, they do colour our inner worlds significantly. Are we failure avoidant/averse parents/teacher/facilitators? Part of being successful in any endeavour in life is to experience failure, survive it, learn from it and move on. How do we speak to ourselves when we make a mistake? If you're a student I invite you to think through it in this specific write up.

If you're a parent or a teacher, what are your own experiences of failure? How were you spoken to when you made mistakes? Did it invite rage and admonishment? Or were you emotionally assisted in navigating through that experience? Was the criticism paralyzing or was it constructive? Were you met with softness? How we are often spoken to in these moments become the ways in which we speak to ourselves. Eventually, it is this that gets passed onto the next generation. What language and vocabulary are we passing onto the next generation? Does it normalise or pathologise ordinary everyday human experience? This also brings me to the value of critical thinking. The term 'failure'/failing in itself must be juxtaposed with an equally problematic definition of success. Who gets to define success and failure is also very subjective. Part of facilitating a young life is to also help children in building a dialogue with this word and its lived consequence. Another crucial factor is normalising and reinforcing ordinariness. Instead of extremes such as failure or success can we teach our children to exist in 'between moments'? Since when did ordinariness get such a bad rep? That process cannot transpire if we ourselves haven't engaged/banished/avoided or become completely lost with our own experiences.

By striking conversations with our parts that carry shame and being able to normalise that for us is eventually what our young ones embody. I would like to end the write up with a question that I think about a lot – What would happen if babies gave up? What if babies fell apart after falling down when they begin walking? We would have a world full of people who are afraid of walking. Yet, babies survive the fall time after time and transition from crawling to walking. If they can, so can we (?).

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