
SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

The New “F” Word: Failure, Failure Identity, and the Slippery Slope of Assessing Child Ego Development Amongst an Emergent Culture of Entitlement

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This paper will provide a discussion of some root causes for childhood entitlement behaviors and cognitions, as well as failure and failure identity development in the current generation. Acknowledgements are cited for the biopsychosocial development of personality types in parents nurturing the experiential development of entitlement, narcissism, and other fractured-ego developments in children. The consequences are discussed as projections of lifelong catastrophic emotional difficulties in personal and professional relationships. Limited research in this area exists; thus, other resources are cited (e.g., blogs and newsprint media sources). Theories surrounding ego development are analyzed. Evidence is provided for poor peer social adjustments and childhood dysfunctional ego development whereby promulgation of victimhood and entitlement are new cultural norms. Popular journal topics discuss a generation of children with failure identities and egocentric fears surrounding failure. The emergence of a new paradigm toward teaching families how to respect power in responsibility-making and leadership is discussed as a potential solution. Finally, a side note discusses the outcome of a singing contestant on ABC’s X-Factor television program as a backdrop metaphor for the topic of learned selfishness.

One challenging assessment to make in terms of child ego development and self-esteem is how to predict if, or how, children will develop a healthy ego bond to self and to those around them throughout their life span. This topic is what many of the forefathers of child psychology constructed as foundational scientific research in order to provide insight on how to best nurture the minds and personalities of children from birth to 18 years of age. Erikson (1950) for example, argued that outside of any biological predispositions, it was a child's experience and familial environment which nurtured crucial factors for providing growth, self-esteem, self-concept and adjustment, and an individual identity. Likewise, Erikson surmised that these characteristics emerge throughout a child's life span as fairly positive and strong, or fairly negative and dysfunctional depending upon the adults providing the skills and familial structure necessary to build a healthy ego bond in their children.

Furthermore, other social cognitive psychologists such as Bandura accentuated Erikson's theories of human development by arguing that children grow into either positive or negative human beings, in addition to learning to make congruent and incongruent life choices, based solely upon the environments they are exposed to (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Under the theoretical tenets of Bandura et al., children learn to imitate the behaviors, cognitions, and expressions of their caregivers. In other words, children develop a positive self-esteem, develop strong self-concepts and awareness, and learn from acceptance and forgiveness or failures and successes by the very environments they are repeatedly exposed to (Bandura et al., 1961). One could arguably state that biopsychosocial forces are either nurtured in healthy ways or experientially exacerbated depending upon the cognitive health of the caregivers (and peers) children interact with and the environmental growth provided to them (Bandura et al., 1961). It is this experiential and developmental psychological perspective that will be the focus of this paper. Specifically, this paper will address how children learn about failure, why the results of failure can become positive learning experiences, and alternately how this kind of growth mindset differs significantly from children developing a failure identity and/or variants of experientially learned entitlement resulting from nurtured overegocentrism.

The limited research in this area is also a testament to not only how the current climate and culture of entitlement has developmentally seeped into many children over the past decade, but also to how much more needs to be done toward reversing behavioral trends which favor or tolerate an entitled generation of children and young adults. For these reasons, there is currently, at best, an equal footing between evidence-based research and online blog columns or short periodical articles addressing pervasive American attitudes about the lack of accepting failure as an option to learn from, and outright selfishness and narcissism being its replacement.

According to Gest, Rulison, Davidson, and Welsh (2008), peer social adjustment and behaviors, as well as acceptance by other developmental peer groups and adults, are significant predictors for how well one adapts over their lifespan (p. 625). They argued that, specifically, similar-aged peer socializing is predicated upon children learning to "balance cooperation and conflict with equal status" in others (p. 625-626). Therefore, collective comparisons made by children from their peers and caregivers in terms of learned skills and how they are liked by others are significant indicators of how children will consequently succeed or fail in life. Gest et al. stated that developmental psychology has already validated this premise. However, they asserted that it is a child's "predictive power" (p. 625-626) which actually determines his or her acceptance and successive life failures, and thus, the reputations earned from their social behaviors. It goes to one's overall likeability, or how one learns to aggress on another, if there are any patterns of social withdrawal or any existing exacerbated mood symptomologies which become obvious via observed behaviors.

Take, for instance, the current topic that many parents today are accused of acculturating their children to avoid failure of any kind. Jim Taylor (2009), a clinical psychologist and blog columnist for *Psychology Today*, wrote that children are learning from the current generation of parents, as well as popular culture, to fear failure in epidemic proportions (paras. 1 & 2). He argued that the current generation is not learning to make healthy, calculated risks which lead to self-satisfaction and an appreciation for hard work (Taylor, 2009). On the contrary, he asserted that most American children are being encouraged to replace these esteem-boosting choices with what actually become diag-

nosable emergent and debilitating surges in anxiety disorders (Taylor, 2009, paras. 1 & 2). As a result, many children develop life patterns of cognitive dissonance exercised through anger and resentments or social withdrawal, fundamentally changing how they learn to understand what it means to achieve or not to achieve real successes and real learned-from failures (Taylor, 2009, para 2).

Ultimately, failing at something, whether it is in sports, academics, the arts, or the foundational life skills, is being dismantled in childhood by a generation of parents and caregivers who equate failure with being a loser (Taylor, 2009). Many parents today, Taylor argued, make the successes and or failures of their children tied to a dependency upon whether acts of love and affection are received or feigned. Hence, the causal predictors children gain here either self-fulfills them as victims or creates a bully in them—ironically the very thing parents fear when teaching their children to avoid failing or failures in the first place (Taylor, 2009).

This craving to *save* or keep children from experiencing any form of failure (even if they obviously could learn something positive from it) has resulted in an emerging culture that embraces selfishness and victimhood, lacks some basic fundamental morals, and demands entitlement (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). In three separate experimental studies of young adults aged 18 to 35 assessed for trait personality and behavioral cues of selfishness, victimhood, and entitlement, authors Zitek et al. (*see also* Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002) discovered through multiple assessments that when young people perceive any kind of departure from what they believe they deserve (and are instead given what they perceive as undeserved wronging by others), they consequently and dramatically increase their beliefs in entitlement. Zitek et al. argued that this kind of cognitive avoidance mechanism was a way for their subjects to

avoid further suffering and to obtain positive outcomes for themselves. Wronged individuals [therefore] feel that they have already done their fair share of suffering—as if there were a maximum amount of victimhood that a person can reasonably be expected to endure—and consequently, they feel entitled to spare themselves some

of life's inconveniences, such as being attentive to the needs of others. (p. 245)

Zitek et al. (2010) predicted that these kinds of results (as well as others they discovered about selfishness and victimhood) indicated just how vast the moral and ethical differences were in their subjects from their own parent's generation (e.g., Baby Boomers). As hypothesized, Zitek et al. found that the majority of the subjects studied sanctioned behaving selfishly and narcissistically and refusing to help another person should that other person have wronged them even in the slightest. The young adult subjects (e.g., undergraduate students) agreeably endorsed self-serving intentions and behaviors because they perceived any kind of wrongdoing toward them—no matter how intentional, mistaken, or even accidental—as meaning they were entitled to claim more accolades and emotional resources for themselves rather than share with others in compassionate and considerate ways (Zitek et al., 2010, p. 245-247).

The arguments and supports presented here are far more intricate in regards to the numerous cognitive layers of learning and development which can be switched into either life patterns of positive growth or cognitive discontinuity. Then again, this depends greatly upon the nurturing ways (or lack thereof) in which parents today either help their children overcome adversity and consequently learn to appropriately flourish or downright accept failure as a way of life and being. As brilliant as Erikson (1950) and Bandura et al. (1961) were in constructing a theoretical framework for child growth and developmental needs, in some fundamental ways their hypotheses and axiological assertions about how value and value judgments are defined by children and young adults seem obviously overshadowed by the current prevailing dysfunctional learned beliefs of children and their parents. A new theoretical paradigm for child growth and development would build upon the works of Erikson, Bandura, and other historical developmental psychologists in order to better reflect the current growth and mind-set needs of today's culture of children (Vedamtam, 2008).

According to Vedamtam (2008) in his Department of Human Behavior column for the *Washington Post*, "Sideline Rage—Sports Parents Go Berserk," this new human developmental design could not come any sooner. He described the ways in which many parents today are vicariously liv-

ing through their children via either the organized sports their children play in or the academic competitions they have been sometimes forced to compete in (Vedamtam, 2008, paras. 5-7). He cited a recent 2008 research study by University of Maryland doctoral graduate kinesiology student Jay Goldstein (*see also* “Sideline Rage Triggers,” 2008) and his sports psychology professor Seppo E. Iso-Ahola, who examined the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of 304 parents about winning, losing, and failure when it came to watching their children play sports. What both discovered through attitude questionnaires was that after every game a child played in which the parent or parents were watching, 53% had consistent levels of anger, entitlement, self-righteousness, and even rage surging in them when they perceived that their child or children were wronged by the judgment calls of the coaches (Vedamtam, 2008). Essentially, the rules of the game were invariably viewed as unfair only when they pertained to a parent’s specific child. These same judgment calls and rules, however, were invariably viewed as fair when it came to other parents’ children (Vedamtam, 2008).

Vedamtam (2008) further wrote that Goldstein and Iso-Ahola (2008) were not interested in measuring how many of the parents became angry so much as they wanted to prove a hypothesis that there was a predictable adult personality type that would always reliably indicate levels of anger and rage as parents or a parent attending their child’s games on a consistent basis (Vedamtam, 2008, paras. 9-10). What Goldstein and Iso-Ahola (2008) discovered was that the personality type of parents or a parent in their study indicated they were individuals with high amounts of narcissism and entitlement beliefs, and they were control freaks and “people who measured their own worth [by the established] criteria of others” (Vedamtam, 2008, para. 10). For example, the assessment questionnaires revealed that the majority of parents who attended their child’s games on a regular basis and consistently had rage or anger emotions expressed and/or consistently showed nonverbal aggressive behaviors toward others during those games, were the types of personalities that displayed excessive and eccentric behaviors in their everyday living (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008). One common personality type in Goldstein and Iso-Ahola’s findings was the parent or parents who would rationalize eating Ramen Noodles or per-

haps feed their children a box of processed Easy-Mac macaroni and cheese each night in order to pay for a luxury vehicle and McMansion home so as to ultimately not “feel unacceptably small compared with a wealthy neighbor who owned a sports car” (Vedamtam, 2008, para. 10). It is all about selfishness, indulgence, excessive coveting, and unhealthy emotional exercises in egocentrism. One could also argue that these same personality characteristics are indicative of histrionic behaviors. Nonetheless, the children of these adult personality types are being developmentally nurtured to emotionally detach from life as an emerging multisensory individual and consequently robbed of their opportunities to engage in being responsible, empathic individuals (Goldstein and Iso-Ahola, 2008).

What the assessments findings reflected in the end truly indicated, according to Goldstein and Iso-Ahola (2008), were that a significant dysfunction occurred during one of the early stages of child development in the parents’ ego development (Vedamtam, 2008, paras. 10-11), and thus what was learned in the normal place of social emotional development was a set of schema Goldstein and Iso-Ahola described as ego triggers related to defensiveness. Children of these parents, then, were a direct link to these schemas vicariously and behaviorally, and hence the groundwork for experientially learned irrational beliefs about selfhood, esteem, courage, failure, and success was being instilled in children through imitative behaviors the parents likely learned from their own parents or caregivers (Goldstein and Iso-Ahola, 2008). The tenets of personality dysfunction and entitlement beliefs make these individuals ripe for sideline raging at any event their child performs in.

What does all of this research information ultimately predict for the children of parents and/or caregivers who aggressively defend selfish acts, consciously and unconsciously nurture entitlement in their children, and view successes as an exultant mantra at the expense of others? In other words, life successes are viewed as never resulting from failure of any sort or kind—it is all or nothing, any failure is a deep, personal loss and thus one is pegged a loser in life. It could be equated to a *take no emotional prisoners* factor about how a child learns to build relationships with others.

According to Dreber, Rand, Fudenberg, and Nowak (2008) (*see also* Uszyńska-Jarmoc, 2007),

children will naturally cooperate with others in groups and on teams if given the opportunity to reflect upon their good deeds in helping others achieve, even if the personal costs are great and the benefits are minimal (p. 348). They argued that most children (as well as some adults) will always cooperatively work together even if each does not admit to truly wanting to be a team player (Dreber, et al., 2008). The lessons learned through team cooperation are respect for self and others, mediation, positive emotional and intellectual nurturing, and guiding mores for how to get along with differing personalities—even if one has to endure a high cost for another player's mistakes in judgment and or character. Dreber et al. asserted that these basic principles of behavioral development more often result in children and young adults having the honed personality tools for navigating the inevitable positive and negative peer relationships they will encounter throughout their life span (p. 349-350).

Finally, CEO and co-founder David Rock of the *NeuroLeadership Institute* in Sydney, Australia—an international research think tank on issues of brain power, leadership qualities, and the neuroscience of cooperative leadership—wrote in one of his weekly columns for the *Huffington Post* (Rock, 2010) that cooperative learning lessons in terms of team work and leadership are great in theory, but are not actually being nurtured enough by most parents today (para. 1). In fact, Rock argued that the long-term effects of keeping children from experiencing failure as part of their natural development through self-actualization and self-esteem are currently having worldwide catastrophic effects on productivity and workplace cohesion as these children become working adults (paras 2-3). Hence, Rock posited that these dysfunctionally-learned behavioral conditions may likely be the responsible culprit for the 21st century coined term “toxic environment” in reference to the workplace (paras 3-4).

Perhaps, in the end, there is no easy answer or quick psychological fix to teaching children and parents today that failure is acceptable. Social psychologists now know that the benefits of parenting courses, for example, far outweigh any long-term deficits for both the parent and the child. Any kind of education which helps children learn that mistakes can be forgiven by self and others, and that ultimately the old adage of *try and try again until you succeed* was not too far off from reality all along. It

is all in how it is framed. Integrating the standards of child development from theorists such as Erikson (1950) and Bandura et al. (1961), for example, with that of current paradigms for mindful thinking, acceptance and commitment therapies, prosocial skill development, and dialectics may offer parents and children better insights into how one achieves and reasonably succeeds in life's expectations for occupational and personal relationship-building. With that said, educators, counselors, and psychologists now have to convince parents and their children that it is in their best emotional and physical interest to change the behavioral trends making their children develop into individuals whose life purview is their own worst enemy.

[On a side note, it seemed poignantly apropos to state here, given this topic of research, that in the final selection round for the October 18, 2011 episode of *The X-Factor* television program, an *American Idol*-style singing competition, music mogul and record executive *X-Factor* panel judge Antonio Reid disqualified a prospective 19-year-old male singer because the young man showed a refreshing and humbling selflessness for himself and his family. Ironically perhaps, as fate would twist life's circumstances, this positive (and perhaps uncommon) character trait was viewed in the end by Reid to be a character flaw when it came to the pop music industry. Reid (2011) told the young male singer that singers and musicians make it *big* by being *selfish* people, and thus he could not trust that the young man would be willing to become a selfish person within the industry in order to make it as big in pop music as say one of his protégés, like Rihanna. As one can only imagine who had not viewed this episode, the prospective singer was emotionally and behaviorally stunned by Reid's decision not to choose him to move on to a live concert round based solely on Reid's belief that the young man lacked a selfish personality—all of his great natural talent aside.]

Author Biography

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