

Praise, Perfection, and Other Inhibitors to Girls' Confidence: How One School Is Changing Its Culture
Presentation by Buffy Baker, Katy Bowers, Jess Hill, Jenny Jervis, Armistead Lemon, Maddie Waud, Adam Wilsman
The Harpeth Hall School
Nashville, TN

Perfectionism

"Of all the warped things that women do to themselves to undermine their confidence, we found the pursuit of perfection to be the most crippling. If perfection is your standard, of course you will never be fully confident, because the bar is always impossibly high, and you will inevitably and routinely feel inadequate. Moreover, perfectionism keeps us from action... We watch our male colleagues lean in, while we hold back until we believe we're perfectly ready and perfectly qualified." ~ The Confidence Code

- Help girls to see that their grades are not indications of their self-worth. Students must look past the numbers to appreciate not only the new skills that they learn, but also the work ethic and resilience that learning requires. Most of all, help them to see the steady progress that as teachers and parents, we see often, but they may not.
- Be candid about failures as well as successes in your own life. This can be as simple as admitting when we mess up because to young perfectionists, mistakes big and small can feel devastating, but all adults have made their fair share and survived anyway. Our girls need to understand that struggle is natural and expected in all aspects of life.
- Maintain realistic expectations for girls and assure that they aren't putting too much on themselves. Be thoughtful with how you react to student behavior. Avoid over-praising good behavior or over-criticizing bad behavior. We must be careful not to reaffirm the popular sense among our girls that they must strive for an ideal that is ultimately unattainable.

Fear of Failure

"Saving kids from failure sends the message that we think they're incompetent, incapable and unworthy of our trust. That's why giving kids the space to screw up is so important — and will be particularly so for girls." ~ Jessica Lahey

Why are struggle and failure so important?

- The brain is a muscle; neural connections form and deepen most when we make mistakes doing difficult tasks rather than through repeated success at easier tasks.
- Struggle and failure promote risk-taking, perseverance, and tenacity that can lead to gaining confidence.
- Trajectory of success is not a straight line. There are many twists, turns, and backwards movements on the road to success.
- Pay attention to the language we use in the classroom and at home. Praise effort and process instead of praising talent (growth mindset). Examples: *I really like how you struggled with that math problem today* instead of *You are so clever*. Another: *You didn't win today, but I liked how you controlled your emotions and mental focus in your match* instead of *I'm sorry you lost your match today*.
- Dinner table conversation: *"Who had a fabulous struggle today?"*
- Desensitize students to failure by talking about our own failures. Help them take failure in stride rather than seeing it as a reflection of self-worth.
- Each day we need to go home & ask ourselves how we promoted the growth mindset with our students.

Sensitivity to Criticism/Likeability

"Distinctive work, innovative thinking and controversial decisions garner supporters and critics, especially for women." ~Tara Mohr

- Substantive, complex work should receive both praise *and* criticism. Many of us carry the misconception that good work will be met mostly with praise. Reinforce the opposite with your students.
- Encourage students to reflect on their relationship to feedback. Discuss the real-world need to unhook from praise.
- Build in feedback throughout a project so that students learn to value good criticism. Ask students to revisit your comments before starting the next project.
- When self-criticism becomes a destructive voice, encourage girls to practice the critical skill of self-compassion instead.

Language of Self-Doubt

"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt."

- Point out negative self-talk in class when you hear it; ask the student to rephrase.
- Allow for choices in assignments so that students feel more empowered. Some projects can be completed as a video or a paper, or in Geometry students can either hand in a two-column proof or give a verbal argument. Students can then start in a place of more confidence and have a chance to take a less frightening risk.
- Work to create a setting in which wrong and misguided responses are seen as valuable contributions.
- Model confident speaking and risk-taking in your own teaching practice.

Comparison

“*Comparison is the thief of joy.*” Theodore Roosevelt

- Teens as well as most adults struggle with this affliction of constantly comparing ourselves to others.
- Comparison is amplified in this time of social media. People are comparing themselves to a perfected persona of their peers as seen through Facebook and Instagram. These mediums portray a fictional version of what we want people to see or what we wish were always true. This leads to teens feeling more isolated and critical of their own social lives.
- In combating the tendency to compare, teens should keep their mind on a larger mission or project to be accomplished for a group of people. “Move from me to we when you realize other people aren’t actually thinking about you all the time.”
- One of the best antidotes to a feeling of inadequacy is to cultivate a regular practice of gratefulness.
- We are making a push to discourage any comparison of grades. We don’t need everyone to feel pressure that they have to tell a group of girls what they made on a test. One girl’s triumph of finally working her way to a B might be another girl’s defeat at making a B. These are personal journeys with personal and individual highs and lows.

Works Consulted and Recommended Reading

Damour, Lisa. *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2016.

Dweck, Carol. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013.

Lahey, Jessica. *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Can Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. New York: Harper Collins, 2015.

Mogul, Wendy. *The Blessings of a B Minus: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Resilient Teenagers*. New York: Scribners, 2011.

Mohr, Tara. “Learning to Love Criticism.” *The New York Times*. 27 Sept 2014. Web. 15 March 2015.

---. *Playing Big: Find Your Voice, Your Mission, Your Message*. New York: Gotham, 2014.

Neff, Kristin. *Self-Compassion*. www.self-compassion.org. Web. 17 Sept. 2015.

Shipman, Claire and Katy Kay. *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance -- What Women Should Know*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014.

---. “The Confidence Gap.” *The Atlantic*. May 2014. Web. 15 March 2015. www.theatlantic.com.

Simmons, Rachel. *The Curse of the Good Girl*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

Tough, Paul. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2012.