Why a fear of failure hits brightest girls the hardest

Alexandra Frean, Education Editor

An educational expert has given warning that schools and parents risk creating a generation of brittle, high-achieving teenage girls who are unable to cope with failure and who fall apart if they fail to live up to their own self-image as innately intelligent.

The refrain from parents and teachers - reinforced by pictures in the media every summer of teenage girls reaping their crop of six A grades at A level - is that girls are smart and do better than boys at exams. But this has made many girls terrified of failure, according to Guy Claxton, Professor of Learning Sciences at the University of Bristol Graduate School of Education.

As a result many are afraid to try things that they may not be successful at and become overreliant on support from parents and teachers. But when failure comes they are unable to cope with it.

"It's often the most highly successful students who are most prone to fall apart when they meet failure, especially girls. Bright girls go to pieces," Professor Claxton told the annual conference of the Association of School and College Leaders in Brighton.

He cited the case of a 15-year-old girl named Emily as typical. "I worry that I have become a tape recorder and that once people stop handing me information with questions, I will be lost," she told researchers.

"Girls like Emily are not equipped for life," Professor Claxton said. The problem is aggravated by parents, who regard praise as essential to raising their child's self-esteem and who may be tempted, if they are working full-time, to pile on the praise to make up for not spending enough time withl their children.

But there is a growing body of research suggesting that telling children that they are smart may be doing them a disservice. Research from Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, has found that among children praised for being smart, the need to maintain this image becomes a prime concern. This is true regardless of class or gender, but it hit the brightest girls the hardest.

In one test girls of differing abilities were given a maths booklet to complete. Unknown to the girls, researchers inserted some questions that were well beyond the capabilities of the students into the centre of half the booklets. They found that the less able girls who were given the extra difficult questions in the middle had ignored them and moved on, completing the second half of the test with relative ease.

"The high-achieving girls could not live up to their self-image of being bright and this bothered them so much that they could not then do the easier questions in the second half of the test that they should have been capable of," Professor Claxton said.

"With high-achieving girls, we often say, 'Right, job well done'. But it's not a job well done because these girls very often don't have resilience or mental toughness," he added.

Pat Langham, head of Wakefield Girls' High School and a former president of the Girls' Schools Association, agreed. "We have to teach all young people how to lose and how to fail, not just how to succeed. The best girls' schools are doing this," she said.

"One way is through encouraging girls to take [a] risk and daring them to fail. I do it myself. I've been known to stop halfway through an assembly if I think I'm messing it up and to say, 'OK, this is terrible. Let's start again.' The girls like that because it's like giving them permission to fail at things."
The solution, Professor Claxton said, was to ensure that praise is specific and relates to what the student has put into their work.

"Praise them for effort, not for being smart. That way, if they fail a test, they can still feel good about the amount of effort put in," he said.

—Schools are replacing the family and the Church as the institutions that teach children manners and set moral boundaries. John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, told its conference. The loss of the family meal, in particular, had "reduced family conversation, so that schools have more to do in teaching children to communicate", he said. Primary schools had to teach children how to use a knife and fork and sit at a table. Most teachers accepted the need to help parents to "rediscover what being a parent means" and to teach children basic values, but they were being hampered in this by excessive government regulation.

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