

How Achievement Motivation And Fear Of Failure Develop

From USA Swimming

Because the motivation to achieve and the fear of failure so strongly affect enjoyment of and performance in achievement situations, researchers have been very interested in understanding how these motives develop. They have found that children who have high levels of achievement motivation but little fear of failure tend to have a history of encouragement and reward for success and independence. Parents of such children tend to emphasize the positive aspects of achievement and to praise their children for their efforts to achieve. Importantly, when their children try hard but nevertheless fail, these parents do not punish or criticize them. Instead, they encourage them to continue their attempts and praise them for their persistence. Because of the emphasis that the parents place on striving to meet standards of excellence, this value is adopted by the children and serves to guide their behavior.

The background of the fear-of-failure child is quite different. These children tend to want to avoid new experiences or activities because of the punishment or rejection associated with previous failures. Their parents tend to focus only on the success or failure experienced by the child, not on the effort the child puts out. They express displeasure with the child when failure occurs but take success for granted and expect it. In some cases, unrealistically high goals are set for the child, and the parents express displeasure when the child does not succeed. It is quite easy to see how such a background would result in a child who has learned to dread failure. Ironically, once the fear develops, its disruptive effects are likely to further decrease the chances of success. What often occurs is a vicious cycle in which failure results in increased anxiety, which in turn helps to ensure future failure.

What Parents Can Do

Sports can be a training ground for the development of positive motivation toward achievement. Parents and coaches can have an important influence on developing attitudes concerning success and failure. Research on the development of the need for achievement and fear of failure offers some pretty clear guidelines for how you can help your child develop a healthy achievement orientation. The key principles seem to be encouraging the child to give maximum effort and rewarding him or her for that effort. Make sure the achievement standards you set are reasonable and within your child's capabilities. When success occurs, enjoy the success with your child and express appreciation for the effort that went into it. Never be punitive or rejecting if the child tries but does not succeed. Show your child that you understand how disappointed he or she is, and encourage the child to continue trying. Communicate love and acceptance regardless of success or failure. If you want to avoid developing fear of failure, don't give your child a reason to dread failure.