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## Reducing Academic Pressure May Help Children Succeed

Released: 3/12/2012 9:00 AM EDT

Source: [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#)

*Telling children learning is difficult could reduce fear of failure, research finds*

Newswise — WASHINGTON — Children may perform better in school and feel more confident about themselves if they are told that failure is a normal part of learning, rather than being pressured to succeed at all costs, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

“We focused on a widespread cultural belief that equates academic success with a high level of competence and failure with intellectual inferiority,” said Frederique Autin, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Poitiers in Poitiers, France. “By being obsessed with success, students are afraid to fail, so they are reluctant to take difficult steps to master new material. Acknowledging that difficulty is a crucial part of learning could stop a vicious circle in which difficulty creates feelings of incompetence that in turn disrupts learning.”

The study, published online in APA’s *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, could have important implications for teachers, parents and students, said Jean-Claude Croizet, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Poitiers who supervised the research based on Autin’s doctoral dissertation. “People usually believe that academic achievement simply reflects students’ inherent academic ability, which can be difficult to change,” Croizet said. “But teachers and parents may be able to help students succeed just by changing the way in which the material is presented.”

In the first experiment with 111 French sixth graders, students were given very difficult anagram problems that none of them could solve. Then a researcher talked to the students about the difficulty of the problems. One group was told that learning is difficult and failure is common, but practice will help, just like learning how to ride a bicycle. Children in a second group were just asked how they tried to solve the problems. The students then took a test that measures working memory capacity, a key cognitive ability for storing and processing incoming information. Working memory capacity is a good predictor of many aspects of academic achievement, including reading comprehension, problem solving and IQ. The students who were told that learning is difficult performed significantly better on the working memory test, especially on more difficult problems, than the second group or a third control group who took the working memory test without doing the anagrams or discussions with researchers.

A second experiment with 131 sixth graders followed a similar procedure with the difficult anagrams and discussions with a researcher. An additional group of students took a simpler anagram test that could be solved, and this group was not told that learning is difficult. All of the students then completed a reading comprehension test. The children who were told that learning is difficult scored higher than the other groups, including the students who had just succeeded on the simple test. How students think about failure may be more important than their own success when learning challenging skills, the study noted.

A third experiment with 68 sixth graders measured reading comprehension and asked questions that measured students’ feelings about their own academic competence. The group that was told that learning is difficult performed better in reading comprehension and reported fewer feelings of incompetence.

The study noted that the students’ improvement on the tests most likely was temporary, but the results showed that working memory capacity may be improved simply by boosting students’ confidence and reducing their fear of failure. “Our research suggests that students will benefit from education that gives them room to struggle with difficulty,” Autin said. “Teachers and parents should emphasize children’s progress rather than focusing solely on grades and test scores. Learning takes time and each step in the process should be rewarded, especially at early stages when students most likely will experience failure.”

The American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world’s largest association of psychologists. APA’s membership includes more than 154,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare.

Article: “Improving Working Memory Efficiency by Reframing Metacognitive Interpretation of Task Difficulty,” Frederique Autin, PhD, and Jean-Claude Croizet, PhD, University of Poitiers and the National Center for Scientific Research, Poitiers, France; *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, online.  
<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/xge-ofp-autin.pdf>