

## Trial by Error

Recently, I found two news stories to be especially evocative, in particular because of the public debate that followed on various Internet fora. The first was the case of the little boy who fell into the gorilla enclosure at Cincinnati Zoo. Soon after, we heard about a Japanese boy, who vanished after his parents left him at a forest roadside, as punishment for bad behaviour. The boy's dad claimed they'd only intended to shock him, returning after 5 minutes to find him gone. Happily, in both cases, the children ended up safe and well. Unfortunately, in the zoo rescue, Harambe, a gorilla, was killed as a precautionary measure in safeguarding the child. Harambe's death sparked outrage, calls for the child's mother to be prosecuted and even some suggesting the child should have been left to die. In the case of the Japanese boy, many initially accused the parents of murdering their son. Accusations of them being unfit to parent continued after the boy's miraculous discovery six days later. The online vitriol that followed, against these parents, was passionate. While I'm not condoning the parents' actions (or possibly inaction), I'm very uncomfortable with the public's deluge of judgement. One moment we are criticised for over-protective, "helicopter" parenting and its possible contribution to the increase in anxiety experienced by our younger generations. The next, if something goes wrong, we've been neglectful and face trial by the "immaculate" public, as these parents have, for the crime of having their eye off the ball for a moment, or making an ill-thought-through decision. It's difficult to know what the right balance is and even then, a freak accident could still leave us getting it "wrong," as has been the case with the tragic death of the Florida toddler, recently killed by an alligator at a Disney Resort hotel.

Our lives, and particularly those of our children, are increasingly being lived on a public stage through the Internet. Sometimes this is willingly embraced through personal blogs, vlogs or Facebook posting. However, all too often it isn't and information and opinion can spread rapidly over the net. A culture of shaming, armchair criticism has emerged, which, combined with the false perfection that is crafted through people's Internet personas, makes it incredibly difficult to admit to sometimes messing up and getting things wrong. The Internet offers the potential for affirmation and support, but at the same time can be very destructive. Unsurprisingly, many recent mental health studies have reported a huge fear of failure experienced by our young people. This fear prevents healthy and necessary risk taking and ultimately the building of their emotional resilience. In this judgemental climate in which we are living, it's hardly surprising we are all afraid to get something wrong, parents and children alike. No one wants to experience shame. However, sometimes our best learning comes from the mistakes that we've made.

Perhaps one way we can begin to tackle this fear of failure begins at home through our own approach to mistakes or missed goals? Can we own and admit to our families when we've got something wrong, without feeling destroyed in the process? Can we see good lessons learned through our errors, which we can share? If we could, what would we do differently and what would we keep the same? We might possibly have even benefitted from an unexpected outcome. Can we say, "I'm sorry"? No one has to be a perfect parent, whatever that might be. Parental perfection, as a model to follow, would also surely be a burden, not privilege, for any child growing-up, imperfectly, as we all do? Indeed, child psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, frequently wrote of the importance of the "good enough" mother for optimal child development - it's okay and necessary not to get everything right all the time. An inevitable danger of living in a trial-by-Internet society, where lives are photo-shopped to perfection, is that it can feel harder to seek help when we need it. It's easy to feel inadequate compared with how other families are perceived to be. Perhaps the Japanese boy's father was truly struggling with his child's behaviour, but rather than asking for support with him, he impulsively made a terrible decision that could have had even worse consequences - ones he certainly didn't intend? With the approaching break and results' days for exam students, the issue of acceptability versus failure, as well as fear of judgement will likely feel heightened for many (parents included!). At this potentially stressful time, I hope you all find authenticity in your relationships and I wish the leavers fortitude with their onward journeys. I'd also like to thank all of the courageous young people who have been to see me this past year, bravely willing to consider all aspects of their self, filters removed. I wish you all the best for the future.