Thoughtful Thursdays

Disappointment – Part 2

I am a Tottenham Hotspur (Spurs) supporter. For those of you who follow the Premier League, that may be all I need to say about disappointment.

As Spurs fans, we begin each season with a modicum of hope, but we never get too carried away. High expectations tend to end in bitter disappointment. Better to keep them low and be surprised by rare success.

Spurs have a wonderful motto: "To Dare Is To Do!" It could hardly be more fitting for a club that enters each season defying the odds, hoping this will be the year we win something—knowing full well we probably won't. But isn't that the point of supporting a team? That fragile balance between success and failure is exactly what keeps us invested. Often, it's the epic comeback or the improbable victory that stays with us longest. A smooth path may bring a certain satisfaction, but it's those who have flirted with catastrophe who truly understand the joy of success.

In the first part of this essay, I reflected on how our own relationship with disappointment affects the way we parent. Here, I want to focus more directly on why failure isn't just inevitable—it's essential for a young person's development. I also want to offer some practical reflections on how we, as parents and educators, can help children navigate disappointment in a way that leaves them stronger, not more fragile.

The Uncertainty of Failure

When something goes wrong for our child—whether it's a falling-out with a friend, a failed exam, or a harsh word from a teacher—the problem is not just what happened. The real discomfort lies in the uncertainty of how the scenario ends. We see the pain or distress, and the outcome is uncertain. Will they bounce back? Will it damage their confidence? Is this the beginning of a pattern?

That uncertainty fuels our anxiety, which in turn triggers the instinct to intervene. By taking control, we believe we can manage the narrative and limit the damage. We try to steer things back on course before it's too late. Sometimes this is necessary—especially if there is real harm—but often we step in not for our child's sake, but to alleviate our own discomfort.
It's easy to rationalise this intervention. We say we're just helping, just supporting, just advocating. And sometimes we are. But there's a fine line between walking alongside our children and walking in front of them. We need to ask: Whose anxiety are we soothing? Theirs—or ours?

Take, for instance, a teenager who's made a mistake at school and ends up in detention. The details don't matter: maybe they handed in work late, maybe they were rude, maybe they broke a rule. Whatever the issue, the child now faces a consequence. How we respond at this moment reveals something about us—and about how much faith we have in our child's ability to cope.

Before acting, it's worth pausing to ask: Is this about their wellbeing, or my need to stay in control? Do I believe they can handle it? Do I trust the school to be fair, proportionate, and thoughtful?

Our children learn not just from what we say, but from what we do in moments like this. If we step in immediately, they may feel protected—but they also hear another message: "I don't think you can manage this on your own." Over time, this can erode confidence and self-agency. It can undermine the very resilience we're trying to build.

On the other hand, when we give them space to take ownership—to face a consequence, to apologise, to make amends—we're offering them something far more valuable than a quick fix. We're offering them dignity and agency.

Why Learning to Cope Matters

Much has been written about the life lessons that failure can teach. Paul Tough, in *How Children Succeed*, is especially eloquent on this point. He argues that when children aren't given the opportunity to fail "productively and creatively," they're more likely to fall apart when they encounter real difficulty later in life. He calls this the 'coddling' effect. We think we're being kind by shielding children from hardship, but in fact we're denying them the chance to learn how to cope with it.

Failure is not a full stop; it's a comma. It's not the end of the sentence, let alone the end of the story. But children only learn that if we let them experience it.
Carol Dweck's work on the growth mindset is another helpful lens. Her research shows that optimism and resilience are born from how children interpret failure. A child with a fixed mindset sees a bad mark as confirmation that they're stupid. A child with a growth mindset sees it as a challenge—a sign that more effort is needed, but not that they're incapable. The way they explain failure to themselves is often more important than the failure itself.

This internal dialogue doesn't happen in isolation. Children learn how to interpret setbacks by watching how adults respond to them. If we panic, catastrophise, or rush in to smooth things over, they learn to fear failure. But if we stay calm, help them reflect, and give them space to grow, they learn that failure is something to be understood—not avoided at all costs.

The Failure Curriculum

It may sound counterintuitive, but disappointment and failure offer some of the most valuable learning opportunities our children will ever encounter. They are not merely obstacles to be overcome; they are shaping forces that help build the very qualities we most hope to instil in our children. Let's explore a few of these.

<u>Grit and Resilience</u>
One of the most important lessons failure teaches is how to bounce back. Children who experience setbacks begin to understand that persistence matters. Sometimes things are hard. Sometimes they require multiple attempts. Sometimes they don't go to plan, even after our best efforts. But that's no reason to stop trying.

In a culture that celebrates ease and instant gratification, it's more important than ever to remind children that effort and determination—"stickability"—are virtues. Struggle is not weakness. Teaching children that perseverance is a form of strength helps build true resilience.

<u>Self-Knowledge and Awareness</u>
Failure fosters reflection and growth. Children who are supported through failure often become more self-aware. They begin to understand their limits, their instincts under pressure, and how they respond to adversity.
Optimists tend to find a story of growth within failure: "I know what I did wrong," or "Next time I'll try this." These quiet reframings plant the seeds of resilience. Over time, they build a confidence that comes not from avoiding failure, but from having faced it.

<u>Perspective and Realism</u>
Children who know that life includes both wins and losses are better equipped for adulthood. They are less likely to be undone by a rejection letter or a poor performance. They understand that setbacks are not the end of the road—just a bend in it.
This grounded view builds perspective. It teaches children that neither success nor disappointment defines them—and that both are part of a much larger journey.

<u>Empathy and Compassion</u>
Children who have known disappointment are often more compassionate. Having struggled themselves, they are less quick to judge and more likely to support others in quiet ways. This isn't just about being kind. It's about emotional intelligence. A child who has faced difficulty is more likely to offer encouragement and to listen well. That capacity for empathy may be one of the most underrated outcomes of challenge.

<u>Gratitude and Humility</u>
When children are always protected from failure, a sense of entitlement can quietly take root. But those who have struggled often approach life with more humility. They know success isn't guaranteed—and that others' achievements don't diminish their own.
Such children are more likely to celebrate others without resentment, and to value their own wins, however small, with gratitude.

<u>Discernment and Letting Go</u>
One uncomfortable but necessary truth failure teaches is that not everything is possible for everyone. This isn't defeatist—it's realistic. Effort matters. But so does discernment.
As Annie Duke writes in *Quit*: "Success does not lie in sticking to things. It lies in picking the right thing to stick to—and quitting the rest." Part of growing up is learning which pursuits deserve our energy—and when it's time to pivot.

<u>Owning Mistakes and Forgiving</u>
Failure often involves hurt—sometimes of our own making. In those moments, children learn how to take responsibility and how to repair. Offering a sincere apology is a mark of maturity.So too is forgiveness—of others, and of ourselves. Holding onto shame or resentment can be paralysing. But letting go, with grace, builds healthier relationships—with others, and with ourselves.

The Success Paradox

There are particular challenges we must remain mindful of in schools like Blundell's. Our children, by virtue of their context, are caught in what I would call a *success paradox*.

The real danger is not that they fail, but that they rarely *truly* do. In many ways, the world around them is built to protect them from failure. We have safety nets—pastoral care, academic support, well-resourced families—and these are good things. But they also mean that for most of our pupils, the day-to-day risks they face are not existential. Their lives are, relatively speaking, secure.

This is not to trivialise their challenges. It *does* hurt not to be invited to a party. It *does* matter when a dream doesn't come true, or when you're not chosen to sing the solo. Emotional pain is real, no matter the context. But we must also be honest: many of the struggles our young people face, though valid, are what we might gently call *first world problems*.

Hardships still come—no life is immune. Rejection stings. Plans fall apart. Bad things happen to good people, and to wealthy ones. But unless we intentionally allow space for our children to struggle and to stretch, we risk raising young people for whom life is too smooth, too managed, too *easy*.

There is another layer to this challenge, and it is more subtle: the fear of letting you down.

Our children grow up in environments where success is not only celebrated—it is expected. Many of our pupils attend Blundell's because you, their parents, have had success in life. They live in homes, communities, and cultures that echo that success. And while that is no bad thing, it comes with an unintended pressure: the unspoken (or sometimes spoken) assumption that they should follow suit.

In such a world, success does not feel optional—it feels like the only acceptable outcome. Children quickly learn the path: work hard, tick the boxes, follow the track. They don't necessarily have to "plough their own furrow"; instead, they follow the well-worn route that has already been mapped out for them.

Again, this is not about entitlement or laziness. Our students work hard. They are determined, ambitious, and capable. But when success feels preordained, the *risk* of failure starts to feel intolerable. Deviating from the expected path becomes dangerous. Why? Because the greatest disincentive to risk-taking is not laziness—it's fear. Specifically, the fear of disappointing those they love.

And that fear is very real. Even if it's not often articulated, the desire to please you, to live up to your hopes and sacrifices, can weigh heavily on a young person. They may not say it out loud, but it shapes their choices. It can lead them to play it safe, to avoid ventures where failure is possible—even if growth might be greater.

I'm mindful that I, too, can unintentionally add to that weight. In my opening assembly of term, I often begin by reminding pupils how fortunate they are to be at Blundell's, and that it is *beholden* upon them to make the most of the opportunity they have been given. I believe this deeply.

In fact, I've said—perhaps too bluntly—that unless they do something meaningful with their Blundell's experience, all of this is just an indulgence.

I mean it sincerely. But I also recognise that to a teenage brain—where nuance is often in short supply—what they may hear is this: *"You had better not mess this up."*

And that message, however well-intentioned, can land heavily.

The Lightness of the Beginner

One of my favourite quotes comes from Steve Jobs, reflecting on being ousted from Apple:

"The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again."

There's something deeply human in that idea. Success, for all its rewards, can weigh heavily. It can bring expectations, scrutiny, and fear. But the beginner feels light. The beginner has nothing to prove. They are free to try, to stumble, to explore.

Children need that lightness. They need permission to begin, not just to finish. To try, not just to achieve. To be playful, not always perfect.

As parents and educators, our job is to create a culture in which they feel safe to experiment. That doesn't mean we eliminate challenge or lower expectations. It means we separate their identity from their performance. It means we cheer their courage, not just their outcomes.

A Considered Response

In his landmark book *Visible Learning*, educational researcher John Hattie evaluated the impact of various teaching strategies on student achievement. Among hundreds of interventions, one stood out above all others: self-efficacy. Put simply, students who believe their efforts can influence outcomes tend to make the most progress.

At Blundell's, we define self-efficacy as the belief that hard work leads to improvement. A child with high self-efficacy approaches challenges with confidence. They believe that with persistence, they can move forward. A child with low self-efficacy, by contrast, feels powerless. They are more likely to think, "There's no point trying—I just can't do it." This echoes the ideas of Carol Dweck and Paul Tough discussed earlier.

Self-efficacy is not just about academic success—it is also central to resilience. A setback feels overwhelming to a child with low self-efficacy; it confirms their belief that they are helpless. But a child with high self-efficacy sees failure as part of the process. They believe they can adapt, learn, and improve. They have agency. They bounce back.

At Blundell's, we see self-efficacy as the most important of our six 'levers' for successful learning. It underpins everything else.

What Can Parents Do?

Helping your child develop self-efficacy means giving them space to cope, and to grow. As parents, it's tempting to step in—to smooth the path, fix the problem, or shield them from

discomfort. But if we always rescue, we deny them the chance to build belief in their own ability to handle difficulty. Teenagers especially need to know that they can face challenges and come through them.

This doesn't mean stepping away entirely. It means stepping alongside. We become mentors rather than managers. We can ask good questions, offer perspective, and share our own experiences. But the work—and the growth—must be theirs.

Some practical ways to support self-efficacy:

1. Praise effort and courage, not just results.
2. Let your child take the lead: ask, "What do you want to do about it?"
3. Offer help on their terms: "What do you need from me?"
4. Model resilience in your own life—own mistakes and move forward.
5. Celebrate the willingness to try, even when things don't go to plan.
6. Be aware of whose disappointment you're feeling—yours, or theirs?
7. Love unconditionally. Let your child know their worth isn't tied to success.

At the heart of this reflection lies a simple truth: failure is not fatal. Nor is it final. It is a chapter, not the whole story. But in order for our children to see it that way, we must *help* them to see it that way. We must create the kind of homes and schools and communities where mistakes are not feared but understood as part of the journey.

We don't need to orchestrate failure. Life will bring its own share. But we *do* need to step back enough to let our children experience it. Not unkindly. Not without support. But with just enough space that they can begin to discover their own ability to process, to learn, to bounce back.

Because one day, when we're not there to fix it for them, they'll need to know that they can. And they'll remember—not that we solved every problem—but that we believed they could stand, and grow, and try again.