

# A Coach's Impact on the Fear of Failure

**By Brian McCormick**

At the park, I watched as a young boy ran all over the place. He tried to play with other young children or he played with his dad, running after his ball and hiking it to his mom. One time, he ran toward our group and picked up speed. All of a sudden, he face planted. He got to his knees, giggled and said, "I fell." Then he got up and started again. He did not slow down. He was not embarrassed. He did not think twice about running again. He laughed and continued moving.

Author Timothy Gallwey (1974) argues that this is the natural learning process. Falling is a part of the process, and it is not good or bad. The natural learning process removes the evaluative aspect. The child did not know that he made a mistake. One minute he was running; then he wasn't. Then he was running again. He did not judge himself or worry about falling. The fall did not cause embarrassment. In his mind, there was no evaluation, no mistake.

The motive to avoid failure is socially learnt between the ages of 5 and 9 (Sagar et al., 2007) as we become aware of the evaluations and criticisms of others. Conroy (2003) found that the description of one's treatment by his or her mother between the ages of 5 and 10 significantly predicted his or her fear of failure scores. Coincidentally, we do a majority of our learning before we reach five years old when this judgment begins to set in.

Think back to when you learned to walk; if your prefrontal cortex was developed fully, you may never have learned. Your mind would have thought about the mistake, worried about others' judgment, and tried to control the movement. You would not have bounced up again as if nothing happened, like the little boy. As Gallwey explains, "The first skill to learn is the art of letting go the human inclination to judge ourselves and our performance as either good or bad."

Fear is a normal reaction to a real or imagined threat (Sagar et al., 2007). Fear of failure is the fear of the consequences of the failure (Conroy, 2003), especially an anticipatory shame and humiliation associated with failure (Conroy & Kaye, 2003). The fear of failure in young athletes stems from (1) a fear of shame or embarrassment; (2) not being good enough; or (3) letting down parents or coaches.

When a child makes a mistake, where is the first place that he or she looks? The coach or the parent. Why? The fear of letting down their coach or parent, and the fear of being taken out of the game (a sign of not being good enough).

How can we change this behavior? FF is a learned habit. "Repeated emotional responses and learned coping strategies are mental habits," (Hanin, 186). How do we, as coaches, break this habit? As the child illustrated, we possessed this skill. Unfortunately, like with any skill, athletes often relapse to old strategies, even after learning new ways to cope.

In *The Art of Possibility*, Benjamin Zander writes about an orchestra rehearsal. Someone makes a mistake, and he stops and says, "How fascinating!" There was no judgment or negative reaction. If there

is no judgment or negative consequence, there is no shame or sense of not being good enough or letting down of others to fear.

Smith and Smoll (1997) studied the coaching behaviors of youth baseball coaches and found that punitive and critical comments comprised only 1.5% of the behaviors coded, but these behaviors correlated more strongly with children's attitudes than any behavior. Smith and Smoll (1997) found that coaches were "blissfully unaware" of their behaviors and children's perceptions of the way they were coached were more accurate than the coach's perceptions of their own coaching (p. 18).

Smith and Smoll (1997) found that the "most important factor determining outcomes is the manner in which this important social learning situation [youth sports] is structured and supervised by the adults" (p. 17). Smith and Smoll's (1997) study showed a 26% dropout rate among players with the control group coaches, and only a 5% dropout rate among the players from the intervention group who received coach instruction. **One principle in Smith's and Smoll's (1997) intervention was to strongly discourage punitive and hostile responses, as they have been shown to create a fear of failure in athletes.** Smith and Smoll (1997) suggest that while many volunteer coaches are competent with their technical knowledge of the sport, few have any formal training in creating a healthy psychological environment for youngsters.

In a classroom study, Robert and Evelyn Kirkhart (1972) found that children thrived when the ratio of positive comments to negative comments was 5:1. However, as the positive to negative ratio sank to 2:1 and 1:1, their attitude was "despairing." In a study of married couples, Gottman (1994) found that marriages were more stable if there were five times as many positive feelings and interactions between husband and wife as there were negative. This concept – termed the "Magic Ratio" – has been adapted into sports through the Positive Coaching Alliance.

This does not mean that instructors cannot instruct. In a follow-up on the 30th anniversary of their landmark study of John Wooden's teaching techniques, Gallimore and Tharp (2004) asked Wooden about his lack of positive praises. In their study, about 75% of Wooden's comments were information about the proper way to do something, while only 6% were categorized as praising. When asked, Wooden responded, "I believe that is the positive approach. I believe in the positive approach. Always have (p. 128)." The goal is to make the instructors aware and to reduce the blaming, while improving the affirming and the information-richness.

For athletes who have a fear of failure, coaches can use Carol Dweck's (2006) concept of *Mindset* to reshape the player's thinking to a Growth Mindset, as opposed to a Fixed Mindset. In Dweck's (2006) theory, people attribute their failure or success to innate talents which are fixed or to their effort, which can grow or expand their ability. Those who attribute failure to a fixed lack of talent are de-motivated by mistakes and fear failure because it suggests that they are not good enough. However, when they can alter their perceptions and see how their effort affects their performance, mistakes become a part of the learning process. A learning-goal orientation (Growth Mindset) positively affects effort, task choice, and performance (Duda, 1987) and is linked to lower levels of tension and worry about performance (Wolf, 1998). An outcome or ego orientation (Fixed mindset) leads to a greater sense of pressure, tension, and worry (Roeser, 1996), three states associated with the fear of failure (Dunn & Dunn, 2001).

