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The First Ingredient in Success....Learning to Deal with Failure.

By John Leonard

In the New York Times Magazine of October 2, is an article by Paul Tough (yep, real name) called “The Character Test.” It’s about Riverdale Country School, one of the elite private schools of NYC. The article deals in depth with the failure of great grades and great test scores to accurately predict success in highly competitive college environments, even for the “very best” of the elite private school graduates.

The Headmaster has concluded that the missing piece is..... character. He said:

“Whether it’s the pioneer in the Conestoga wagon or someone coming here in the 1920’s from southern Italy, there was this idea in America, that if you worked hard and you showed real grit, you would be successful. Strangely, we’ve now forgotten that.”

“People who have an easy time of it, who get 800’s on their SAT’s, I worry that these people get feedback that everything they are doing is great. I worry about that. I think we are actually setting them up for long term failure. When that person has to face up to a difficult moment, then I think they are screwed, to be honest. I don’t think we’ve given them the opportunities to grow the capacity to be able to handle that.”

A review of those who DID succeed in competitive colleges showed a real prevalence of skills in specific areas: optimism, persistence and social intelligence. They were the ones who were able to recover from a bad grade and resolve to study and do better next time. They were the ones who could bounce back from a fight with their parents, recognize the nature of family (and friends) and re-secure those relationships into balance, and those would could resist the urge to go to the movies with friends and stay home and study instead. They were the kids who could persuade teachers to give them help after class.

“Our kids don’t put up with a lot of suffering,” says a Riverdale teacher, “and when they do get uncomfortable, we tend to hear from their parents. The parents miss the point that being uncomfortable is what helps the child grow.”

Since swimming is simply a part of life education, the parallels are obvious. No matter what part of life is involved, the ability to deal effectively with failure and use the lessons provided to move you closer to success is clear. Parents who spend time “protecting” their children, do them a disservice, and actually disrespect the child who is always stronger and more capable than we, as parents, think.

Everything we do for our children that they can do for themselves, makes them weaker, not stronger. Seek adversity for your child. Allow them the honor of struggling. It’s what made you successful. If you remove the struggle, you remove their opportunities to get stronger in life.