

We should teach our children how to fail

By Jacqueline Maley

Artist James Powditch was rejected for this year's Archibald Prize. It was, by his own standards, a failure. A person only enters a competition to win it, or at the very least, to be included on the shortlist. In the selfie-driven, life-curation-for-social-media-age we inhabit, failure is as unspeakable as a bad smell in a small space.

Powditch's fantastical portrait, of Sydney Story Factory founder (and, it must be disclosed, my sister-in-law) Cath Keenan, will hang instead in the Salon des Refuses at the SH Erwin Gallery.



What was so marvellous about the story was Powditch's unvarnished assessment of his own shortcomings.

"Really, honestly, my career is going nowhere," he told journalist Andrew Taylor.

Salon des Refuses soothes heartbreak of rejection for James Powditch

"When you don't make the Archibald and you end up in the Salon, the Salon is always the better show that year ... the reality is the Archibald would have garnered a bigger audience."

Powditch should get a prize for plain talking. I cannot remember the last time I heard such a blunt and un-self-serving admission of public failure.

We live in a time where narcissism is normalised and where social media gives us the power to spin our own lives with the calculation and fabrication of a team of marketing executives.

Even though we know it's all rubbish, people's constant self-promotion on social and traditional media, the scrolls of perfectly styled family holidays and just-so children, the odious retweeting of compliments to oneself, it still coats the walls of the modern world, and is increasingly difficult to escape.

That's true even when the mask slips. Take comments this week from author and social media star Zoe Foster Blake, who catalogues her family life on Instagram, complete with adorable toddler and Italian holidays. In an interview with the ABC, the journalist ventured that Foster's life seemed "sort of perfect".

"I know it does!" Foster responded. "It seems perfect because we choose what we portray."

At least she cops to her conscious curation. I had a look at her Insta account – it's funny, harmless escapism.

But there is a reason social media is consistently linked, in study after study, to poor mental health for young people. Images of success, physical and material, these days proliferate in all public and private spaces. Nowhere are children taught that failure, or even just a pedestrian lack of success, are a normal part of life, a necessary part.

Last year American schoolteacher and writer Jessica Lahey published a book called *The Gift of Failure* based on her experiences observing parents who leapt into their children's lives constantly to protect them from failures big and small.

There were parents who wrote their children's assignments for them or ferried a child's forgotten lunch to school, instead of letting them experience the consequences of their own mistakes and allowing them to negotiate solutions (eg decide to either go hungry or borrow money from a friend).

The worst parents, Lahey argues, are not just over-protective but privilege their child's world view over the facts. These children never experience natural consequences. Until, of course, they get clobbered by life in an adult environment where their parents are not there to run interference.

The kids end up feeling incapable and dependent because their parents have implicitly taught them that's what they are.

"My 'best' students – the ones who are happiest and successful in their lives," Lahey wrote in a 2013 article for *The Atlantic*, "are the students who were allowed to fail,

held responsible for their missteps, and challenged to be the best people they could be in the face of their mistakes."

Failure, and its close cousin, regret, teach foresight, problem-solving and (hopefully) better restraint next time. Failure also teaches us compassion and empathy, because it humbles us and knocks the smugness out of us.

Best of all, it teaches resilience, which is surely the best trait any parent can foster in a child.

The other thing about failure, as opposed to the tedious projection of success and perfect hair, is that it is interesting.

Failure stories are better. Jane Eyre wouldn't have been Jane Eyre if Jane hadn't flunked life's lottery and ended up in semi-indentured slavery chez Rochester. Nobody would have wanted to read about an Anna Karenina whose decision to leave her husband for Count Vronsky turned out to be a sensible one.

In 2013 the Guardian published seven writers reflecting on failure. It makes for great reading. Diana Athill "knew" herself to be a failure from the ages of 22 through 39, she says. Margaret Atwood asks, "Who told us we had to succeed at any cost?" Will Self states that "a creative life cannot be sustained by approval" and Lionel Shriver observes that there are "scads" of self-help books on how to succeed, but none on how to contend with its opposite, "which is more the form for practically everybody, right?"

Athill's last word is the best: "It is possible to recover from failure: to digest it, make use of it and forget it."

We should teach that in schools, and post it on Facebook.

Source: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/we-should-teach-our-children-how-to-fail-20160714-gq5nwx.html>