

**Kevin C. Costley, Ph.D.
Arkansas Tech University
1310 North El Paso Avenue
Crabaugh Building Room 204
Russellville, AR 72801-3263
Phone – 479-964-3256
kevin.costley@atu.edu**

Remember John Holt and “How Children Fail”? A Book Review

In the book, “How Children Fail”, John Holt simply but honestly records classroom interactions in a refreshing, realistic, and humorous style of delivery. The first twenty-five pages are extremely humorous; however, the remainder of Holt’s book then becomes more serious in style. With each classroom account, I vividly and vicariously experienced each classroom interaction; many scenes entered my mind. Many of Holt’s real stories had to do with teachers often falling into the trap of asking students questions and looking only for “right answers.”

While recently reviewing “How Children Fail” after my first reading in 1979, I realized there is a magnitude of educational materials in the field of education concerning theories, but little (if any) of these theories tell teachers how to answer children’s questions in the classroom.

As implied in the title, “How Children Fail”, Holt’s main thrust is child failure in a success oriented culture. He is alarmed at the increasing role of failure in the American schools. He warns against teachers using subject-matter in an end

itself. It appears a lot of teachers *teach subjects*, rather than *teach students*. By teaching only subjects, abstraction, curiosity, appreciation, discovery, interaction, exploration, and intrinsic motivation are suppressed. Ironically, these qualities are professed to be objectives of American education. Even students who consistently make higher grades often times fail to develop creativity and understanding.

Holt deals with three reasons why children fail. They fail because of fear, boredom, and confusion. For fear of disappointing what Holt calls, “anxious adults”, children are afraid to fall below adults high expectations. Many children become bored because much of the curriculum is irrelevant, trivial, and dull. Such studies don’t require a display of true potential. Confusion goes directly with boredom. Many failing students fail to understand the relevance of the assignments they are doing simply because it is understandingly difficult, if not impossible, to achieve something relevant in something obviously irrelevant. Children need to see how the information they learn at school can be transferred into the real world.

The attitude seems to prevail: Schools are a place where *“they make you go and where they tell you to do things and where they try to make your life unpleasant if you don’t do them or don’t do them right.”* Children obviously don’t understand the meaning of real learning. They are conditioned to get the task completed as easily as possible. Thus, children develop numerous strategies and most teachers fall into their trap being unaware of the goals in which children operate.

Children use these knee-jerk strategies to get by and avoid failure. These strategies are the ways children meet or dodge adult demands. They are used because children worry about failure; Americans in general rate success too highly! Holt's counter philosophy is sound, indeed. He believes children should learn early that they don't always succeed at every goal and endeavor. In learning, students should aim higher than they think they can reach. What they fail to do today, they may achieve and make great gains tomorrow. Holt strongly warns teachers to protect children when possible from repeated failures. Failure should be viewed as honorable and constructive. Only resistance and withdrawal is dishonorable and termed "failure."

Holt relayed one humorous and cute example of a child's strategy in operation incriminating both the teacher and the child. *"She knows the teacher's strategy of asking questions of students who seem confused, or not paying attention. She therefore feels safe in waving her hand in the air, as if she were bursting to tell the answer, whether she really knows it or not."*

The teacher must be a shrewd observer of student behavior to recognize such strategies. Holt states, *"You can't find out what a child does in class by looking at him only when he is called on. You have to watch him for long stretches of time without his knowing it."*

Holt refers to "producers" as children who are "answer-grabbers" and "teacher-pleasers." These children thrive in obtaining right answers because they have learned that in our educational systems, right answers pay off rich dividends such as praise. It is interesting to note that Holt sees most adult praise

of children as a kind of self-praise. In the American system producing these kind of “producers”, our schools become discouraging places for real thinkers. Holt believes that students need to use their intelligence for fuller self-actualization.

Holt describes intelligence as “*not just the ability to score well on tests, but the ability to behave properly in new perplexing situations.*” The true test of intelligence involves the impromptu decision making, especially in the time of crisis.

Holt contrasts two types of children in the classroom: the dull child versus the bright child. The bright child is intelligent, a problem solver, enjoys experimenting, can tolerate uncertainty, will take risks and has a sensible attitude about the world. The dull child fears trying to do anything, fears uncertainty, isn’t motivated to experiment, and views the world as senseless.

These two types of children possess a different set of attitudes. “*If the bright child fails to master a task, he looks without shame or fears at his mistakes and learns what he can from them.*”

In both of these types of children, we as teachers destroy most of the intellectual and creative potential of children by the things we make them do. Our concern is with manipulating and controlling students rather than trying to understand their behaviors. Holt maintains teachers consciously and deliberately make the child afraid so that “*we might more easily control his behavior and get him to do whatever we want him to do.*” Fear is used as an instrument of control. Therefore, teachers essentially make students afraid to gamble, experiment, and make hypothesis about the unknown.

Through fear and offering petty and arbitrary extrinsic rewards, teachers ultimately destroy the love of learning. Holt takes a stand against the behaviorist approach of breaking subject matter into smaller disconnected bits of information resulting in little, if no true integration. Children find it confusing when they have difficulty putting these little bits of fragments of information together into a meaningful and applicable “whole.” Students interpret their confusion as stupidity, when in reality, the actual stupidity lies mainly in the poor preparation of the material. Holt brings to the surface teachers’ encouragement of stupidity by incorporating so-called learning opportunities that are nothing other than boring and repetitive, thus making very little use on real intelligence. We then fool ourselves by defending repetitive busywork as good preparation for life. School is not viewed as a rewarding activity in itself.

Children are then forced to use only a small part of their intelligence and thinking capacity. We tell children what we expect of them at school, what kind of people we want them to be, and what we want them to think. , We present a false picture to children in that teachers are always right and always rational. Of course, teachers are human and this traditional inculcated belief is not true.

To prevent failure, Holt suggests a better approach. A more humane approach may seem impossible, yet it is not. Children need to be able to talk freely about themselves and their lives with the assurance that teachers will listen without judging, viewing each child as an individual of significant worth.

Holt also suggests that schools often cannot decide on what curriculum, yet they agree that knowledge is essential. He advocates that schools should try

to “turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.” Holt maintains that schools are not turning out these kinds of people who seek to find learning, truth, and enjoyment in everything in life. He advocated the guidance role for the teacher. Effective teachers should guide students into knowing what is available in resources and where to look for information.

Holt expressed his concern concerning two problems of American schools. He believed that teachers should stop children from being afraid. Teachers should also break children from bad thinking habits as a result from fear. *“A scared fighter may be the best fighter, but the scared learner is always a poor learner.”*

In the process of reviewing Holt’s premises and beliefs in his 1964 publication, it does seem apparent that schools in America have made many overall improvements in how children are treated and taught. Teachers are now much less authoritative and are more gentle and kind. Teachers are learning to connect with children’s’ backgrounds and prior experiences, implementing more diverse and appropriate lessons. They are realizing the importance of developing more developmentally appropriate lessons and activities. Teachers listen to children and demonstrate mutual respect. Hopefully today there are less scared learners who embrace each day at school with enthusiasm without fear.

Reference

Holt, J. (1964). *How Children Fail*. New York: Pitman Press.