

# Children Who Fail at School But Succeed at Life

by Mark Katz, PhD

**IT WAS A VERY SPECIAL PLACE.** Or an awful place. A place where you learned about your greatest gifts and talents. Or your worst shortcomings. Where you came to see yourself as smarter than most. Or not very smart at all. A place where you found the confidence you needed to succeed in the world. Or where you learned that you'll never amount to much of anything. It was a place where you saw firsthand the value of perseverance. Or the futility of perseverance. It was a very warm and friendly place. Or a very mean and nasty place. The place? School.

A number of people currently enjoy meaningful and successful lives, thanks in large part to their earlier school experiences. And a number of other people currently enjoy meaningful and successful lives, in spite of their earlier school experiences. Surprised? If so, you're hardly alone.

Until recently, not much attention was paid to successful people who did poorly in school. Why not? One reason might be that few among us realized how many of them are actually out there. But another and even bigger reason might be that many of us doubted that it was actually possible. And those doubts are entirely understandable. After all, think of the thousands of hours people spent trying their hardest to help these failing children turn things around in school, sometimes with little or nothing to show for it. And if these children continued to struggle and fail in school with all this help and support, how could they ever succeed in the real world decades later without it?

So, what did we miss? Why were we so wrong about them? And how can we use these lessons learned to prevent others from having to endure the years of school failure they endured decades ago? We can use the answers to these questions and the lessons learned to change the odds for those who currently struggle much like they did decades ago, including those whose struggles have persisted beyond their school-age years.

Here are a few of the many lessons learned:

- It's really true. *"There's never anything so wrong with us that what's right with us can't fix."* The opportunity to do what we love

to do and also do well can reveal personal strengths and qualities that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. And this is as true for school-age children as it is for adults.

- To feel we belong and have something important to contribute is a universal need. For some, it's a need that went largely unfulfilled until their adult years. Today, we're much more aware of how to fulfill this universal need during our school-age years. There's reason to believe that doing so can prevent a range of potentially serious school-related and later life problems.
- There are many different ways of being smart, some of which can't be measured by how well one does in school. Knowing this and truly believing this can avoid personally humiliating experiences at school as well as in life.
- No matter how smart one might be in whatever areas, it does not make them wise. To be wise is to know how to use our strengths and our successful life experiences to serve not only our own personal needs but the needs of others as well.
- How we perceive the differences and challenges that others endure, school-age children included, can determine how they perceive these same differences and challenges. This in turn can determine whether they come to see themselves as courageous and resilient or, conversely, as helpless and hopeless. You and I, therefore, have more influence than we may realize in determining who overcomes adverse childhood experiences and who succumbs.

From *Children Who Fail at School But Succeed at Life: Lessons from Lives Well-Lived*, by Mark Katz, PhD. Copyright 2016 by Mark Katz. Published by W.W. Norton & Company, New York.



- Expanding upon this last point, we now know how to create social climates where difference no longer signals danger. The problem is that we usually forget to do it, which can help explain why those thousands of hours of help, year after year, by dedicated and caring people trying to change troubled lives might not have produced the results that were hoped for. They were provided in places where feeling different felt very dangerous.
- People can grow quite adept at raising their personal expectations while simultaneously leveling their personal playing field. And the creative ways they learn to use tools, technologies, strategies, and available resources to navigate around learning, behavioral, and other challenges serves a testament to their resilient spirit.
- A number of those who overcame difficult childhood experiences have learned to transform the pain of their past into meaningful action on behalf of others. We're now learning how to help struggling school-age children eventually learn to do the same.
- For a number of those who overcame a difficult past, their emotional self-regulation and self-control skills improved over time. Today, we have specific tools to help improve these same skills in young school-age children. And research suggests that improving these skills can potentially prevent wide ranging health, mental health, and life adjustment problems years down the road. Some experts in the field would actually consider this the short list.
- A range of specific contextual influences have helped a number of people access inherent resilient qualities not easily accessed during their earlier school-age years. These contextual influences seem entirely transportable to a school day. Thus, if effectively weaved into a typical school day, they may also help to prevent school failure and improve later life educational, mental health, and life adjustment outcomes.
- These same contextual influences may potentially also outweigh the harmful effects of exposure to several, if not most, of the adverse childhood experiences that the Adverse Childhood

Experiences (ACE) Study results link to serious later life medical problems. Weaving these contextual influences in and around a school day may not only improve educational, mental health, and life adjustment outcomes down the road. They may also prevent serious medical problems down the road as well.

- It's impossible to predict what will become of us in the future based upon what may have happened to us in the past. It's among the mysteries in life that makes one a believer in second, third, and fourth chance opportunities, and in knowing that lives can change for the better at any point in time, sometimes in response to completely unanticipated and unpredictable events. Experts who study resilience through the lifespan refer to these life changing experiences as turning points.
- Regarding this last point, those who consistently reach out to help improve the life of a struggling child are often unaware that they may represent an eventual turning point in that child's life—a turning point that the child may not be fully aware of until years down the road.
- Those who, in time, “beat the odds” can usually name one or more people in their lives that helped to change the odds, proof perhaps that our greatest source of strength is each other. 🍀

*A clinical and consulting psychologist, **Mark Katz, PhD**, is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center in San Diego, California. As a contributing editor to Attention magazine, he writes the Promising Practices column and serves on the editorial advisory board. He is also a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award*

Be  
**Extraordinary**  
#CHADD0016

Mark Katz, PhD, will present an institute focusing on information contained in his new book at CHADD's Annual International Conference on ADHD in Cost Mesa, California.