

# The Risky Business of Learning - and Why Failing Matters



EDGBASTON  
HIGH SCHOOL



*As parents, our primary concern is the safety and well-being of our children, but a healthy dose of risk-taking in childhood, such as riding bikes or climbing trees, is an integral part of nurturing resilience and independence in our young ones.*

*Additionally, fostering an environment that supports trying out new and unfamiliar concepts with learning, known as intellectual risk-taking, helps cultivate curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills.*

At Edgbaston High School (EHS), our underlying ethos is to prepare girls for success both in and beyond school. We work hard to instil a curiosity-driven culture that helps girls reach their full academic potential whilst acquiring indispensable skills that help them respond positively to life's inevitable ups and downs.

## **Girls Can Struggle to Take Risks**

There is evidence that girls, and in particular higher attaining girls, can struggle to take risks with their learning. Where achievement is routinely praised above all else, students can develop an unhealthy habit of only completing tasks that guarantee success. In a world where anything short of perfection is perceived as negative, the prospect of failure, looking foolish or disappointing others can become so distressing as to prevent these children from reaching beyond their comfort zone or taking any form of risk whatsoever.

## **Championing a Growth Mindset**

Our response at EHS is to embrace and champion a growth mindset philosophy – one that teaches girls to see failure as an inevitable part of life and an opportunity to learn. The Preparatory Department at EHS has recently worked with researchers at The University of Oxford, on an intervention to create a safe space for intellectual risk-taking in the classroom. Led by Claire Pavlovic, More Able, Gifted and Talented Coordinator in the Preparatory School at EHS, teachers adapted a number of research-based strategies, enabling all pupils to practise and take risks with their learning.

Claire explains:

“Creating an atmosphere where students feel comfortable to explore, experiment, and take risks with problem solving and learning is vital in the learning process. Intellectual risk-taking that stretches students beyond their current ability means that inevitably there will be failures along the way. But by learning to persevere and embrace challenges, students can develop a sense of ownership in the learning process and will discover what they are capable of. The theory, backed up by research and real-life evidence, is that exposing children to challenges with a degree of risk not only bolsters self-confidence but it teaches vital skills like persistence and resilience, which play a pivotal role in academic achievement and success later on in life.”

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### **An Opportunity for Learning**

“We encourage our girls to become active learners who are willing to question and challenge information, and seek evidence-based answers. In doing so, we nurture qualities such as curiosity, collaboration and creativity. When mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning, the fear of being ‘wrong’ is eliminated and students are provided with a supportive space to challenge themselves.

It’s no surprise then that teachers have observed an increase in pupil risk-taking over the course of the intervention and continue to see the ripple effect with girls becoming increasingly courageous in their learning over time”.

### **Education is More than Just Exam Results**

Education at EHS is about far more than just achieving good exam results. Attainment is, of course, critical but in order to fully prepare children for the world we must simultaneously help them develop key social, emotional and life skills. Being comfortable with risk-taking and perhaps more crucially, being able to dust yourself down and deal with the fallout when it doesn’t go quite according to plan, might be one of the most important skills we teach when it comes to getting EHS girls ready for life beyond school.

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