

# How courage can help students learn and achieve

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Overcoming a child's fear of failure and anxiety in schoolwork is key to their success.

Teaching students how to bring courage into their day-to-day school life can improve their learning, performance, and engagement at school.

This is a key implication of research by Professor Andrew Martin, from the Faculty of Education and [Social Work](#), at the University of Sydney. His research on the little-studied area of academic courage is published in the current issue of *School Psychology Quarterly*.

The study looks at how the role of courage in the classroom can be linked to [academic performance](#) and engagement. It examined four approaches to [schoolwork](#) in high school - courage, [confidence](#), avoidance, and [helplessness](#).

Professor Andrew Martin explains, "Courage is defined as perseverance in the face of academic difficulty and fear. Confidence, by contrast, is perseverance without the presence of fear.

"On some important outcomes (including achievement in literacy and numeracy) courage was as effective an approach as confidence. On other outcomes, confidence was more effective, however, courage was a very close second. So, while we already knew that confidence is linked to positive educational outcomes, this study is significant because it shows that courage is also an educationally effective response - particularly in the face of fear and anxiety.

"The wonderful news for students, their teachers and parents, is that if students who lack confidence can be given strategies and the encouragement to persist, they can have good academic outcomes - indeed, matching that of confident students at the same level of ability."

Confidence may not always come easily to students, so it is heartening, Professor Martin observes, that if students persevere when they are confronted with academic challenges, it can help improve their performance and engagement.

"An extra benefit is that teaching our children perseverance in the presence of fear may be a way to build their confidence - if they achieve positive outcomes as a result of being courageous, that courage may then become a springboard to confidence," Professor Martin said.

In terms of educational strategies, the study signals the importance of perseverance and the benefits of reducing academic fear and anxiety. Strategies that teachers and parents can use to boost perseverance are to encourage students to set goals; to decide what they are aiming for and how to get there. Also, students who are taught how to manage their study by planning, using their time well, and prioritising, will have some

of the tools to help them to persist in the face of difficult tasks.

Ways to reduce fear of failure and anxiety in schoolwork include teaching students that mistakes are opportunities for learning and to see their academic performance in terms of personal progress and improvement. For example, Professor Martin's previous research has found that focusing on personal best goals can be a way of reducing anxiety in competitive educational situations.

"Shifting students' focus onto controllable elements such as effort and goal setting is aimed at empowering [students](#) and reducing problematic levels of academic fear," Professor Martin said.

**More information:** The research sample for this study comprised 7637 high school students from 14 Australian schools. The article appears in *School Psychology Quarterly* 2011, Vol 26, No 2, 145-160.

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