

MAKING AND MENDING MISTAKES

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Here are two of my favorite quotes about learning from our experience:

“Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.” ~ Bob Packwood

“Experience is not the best teacher, it is the only teacher.” ~ Joe Keegan

What did you learn about mistakes as you grew up? Did you learn that they were bad, or that you were inadequate or unacceptable if you made them? Did you learn to manipulate so that you didn't get caught making mistakes? Did you learn to hide them, and avoid being seen as someone who makes mistakes? Did you learn to judge others when they made them, and fear the judgment of others when you made them?

Most of us adopted some of these ideas about mistakes as we grew up. Ironically, if you ask most adults where they learned their greatest lessons and gained their wisdom it was from their own life experience, or rather from making mistakes. So, why is it that we are so afraid to make them, when they really are a veiled opportunity to grow?

It's funny how when we are most afraid to make mistakes we seem to make them more often - then comes the feeling of inadequacy and the tendency to hide our mistakes. Of course when we seek to hide our mistakes or justify them, then we lose the opportunity to learn and grow from them and to fix them, and to allow others to learn from them as well. We also isolate ourselves from others and miss the opportunity to develop stronger relationships.

Mistakes are an opportunity to learn. Have you ever worked in a place where it was OK to make a mistake and to learn from it? A home, classroom or workplace that allows for imperfection and also provides the means to learn and grow from making mistakes is an emotionally and intellectually safe place where people tend to thrive, feel good about themselves, build strong relationships, learn from one another and become capable problem-solvers. When adults or children feel the freedom to make mistakes and the trust to learn from them they feel accepted and empowered.

Creating an environment for children where it is OK to make and learn from mistakes starts with us, and how comfortable we feel in making mistakes, how we respond to children when they make them, what we teach them to do when they make them, and what we do when we make them.

Creating an environment where it's OK to make mistakes:

- Use the phrase, “Mistakes are an opportunity to learn.” often.
- When children make mistakes, behaviorally or technically, use reflective questioning to help them process what they just experienced vs. giving lectures:
 - What happened?
 - How did that happen, or what caused that to happen?
 - How are you feeling?
 - What did you learn?
 - What's your plan for next time?
 - Etc.
- Admit your own mistakes when you make them (see the “3 Rs” below)

- Teach children to make amends and to take responsibility – this is often the easier path, no?
- Avoid punitive parenting styles where children “get in trouble” for making mistakes.
- Offer encouragement whenever your child(ren) take responsibility for a mistake. “Thank you for taking responsibility for your mistake, that means a lot to me.” “I notice that you admitted your mistake openly. That must have taken a lot of courage.”
- If you are like me, and have a keen eye for the mistakes that others make (I call this “mental red ink”), use that same perceptual skill to identify the specific things that your children do well. This is hard for those of us who are born critics, so if you have difficulty doing this, then here's a suggestion: Take a situation (homework, soccer game, chores around the house, etc.) and inventory only the good things that your child is doing – be specific. Write them down if you need to, and then let them know what you observed. After a few times of doing this you'll notice that the same talent that you have for identifying the flaws in others can be used to identify their strengths.

When we, as adults, make mistakes that may have caused hurt feelings it is important to make amends. This builds trust, forgiveness and most importantly an environment where it is OK to make mistakes. Sometimes adults have difficulty in making amends to children because they are worried that if they show vulnerability that the children will become manipulative, or that the adult will be excusing poor behavior on the child's part. Other adults over apologize because they are over-worried that their mistakes are harming their children or that their children will reject them if they make too many mistakes. It can be safely said that if we follow some simple guidelines that these pitfalls can be easily avoided. When we take responsibility for our actions, children will often follow suit. As well, a sense of trust gets built, and feelings of guilt and shame are often replaced with a sense of closeness and forgiveness and mutual respect.

Guidelines to making amends to children and teaching children how to make amends (the 3 R's):

1. **Recognize** the mistake. Take responsibility simply and directly, without any excuses.
 - a. Yes: “I yelled at you. You didn't deserve that.”
 - b. No: “I yelled at you because you were talking back to me.”
2. **Reconcile** by apologizing. Avoid explaining why, and acknowledge any harm.
 - a. Yes: “That must have hurt your feelings. I'm sorry.”
 - b. No: “I'm sorry. I was really tired and cranky from a long day.”
3. **Resolve** the problem by working on a solution together or asking what you can do to make it right. Avoid lecturing and conditional problem-solving.
 - a. Yes: “How can I fix this?”
 - b. Yes: “What could we do, together, to avoid this happening in the future?”
 - c. No: “I won't yell at you anymore, if you will clean up your room on time.”
 - d. No: “You should be ready in the morning for school and I won't have to yell.”

It is amazing how forgiving children can be, and how quickly they can forget our mistakes if we take responsibility and fix them. It is equally amazing how much they will follow our lead in taking responsibility for their own actions if they have a good model.