

Mistakes as Opportunities for Learning

Making mistakes is human. Regard your mistakes as inevitable instead of feeling guilty, and you'll learn better.

Rudolf Dreikurs¹



Bill Schorr

Children can be taught to feel shame when they make a mistake, or they can be taught to be excited about mistakes as opportunities to learn. The former leads to low self-esteem and a fear of learning. The latter leads to a sense of confidence and capability and the resiliency.

Too many of us grew up believing that mistakes were shameful so we decided we should do one or all of the following:

1. Don't take risks for fear of making a mistakes

¹ Rudolf Dreikurs, ABCs of Guiding the Child

2. If you make a mistake try to hide it — even if that means lying about it.
3. Find excuses, or, even better, blame someone else..
4. Become a perfectionist and become compulsive about not making mistakes.
5. Decide you are “not good enough” because you aren’t perfect.

Imagine a classroom where mistakes are welcome as learning opportunities. In this classroom students feel safe (and even encouraged) to share their mistakes and what they learned from them. When the mistake creates a problem, students are encouraged to focus on solutions. When the mistake involves hurt feelings, students (and teachers) can use the 4 R’s of Recovery to make amends.

1. **Recognize** that you made a mistake. Feel the embarrassment and then let it go.
2. Take **Responsibility** for your mistake without blame or shame.
3. **Reconcile** by apologizing. (Children are so forgiving when others (including adults) are willing to apologize. The Universal response is, “That’s okay, teacher.”)
4. **Resolve** by focusing on solutions for the future.

Teachers who take time to embrace mistakes, and share their own mistakes, help students develop a healthy attitude and skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

Tool Card in Action: Elementary School Teacher in Washington

I really enjoyed our last session and wanted to share a story with you about apologizing for a mistake. In our last class we talked about apologizing and showing our students that we make mistakes and don’t always keep it together. Well...I have a 4th and 5th grade African Drumming concert tonight and had been spending music class practicing with the students. One of my most talented 4th grade boys, who is also a leader on the drums, was not taking our practice seriously. He was goofing off, being silly, and ended up messing up the entire group.

Well...being on my last performance nerve I called him out in front of the entire class. As soon as I humiliated him in front of the entire group I saw he was devastated. I knew I had made a mistake. We finished practice and he did a great job. At the end of class I pulled him aside and said, “I just wanted to apologize for calling you out in front of the entire class. You always work really hard and I lost my patience and should not have done that.”

He immediately smiled and said, “No, I was not following directions and I can do

better.”

I replied with, “Yes you can, but I am still sorry for how I handled the situation.”

It was that moment when everything we have been discussing and practicing finally clicked. Not only with this 4th grader, but with many students, I stop myself or breathe and think about the child before I get upset.

Tricia Hill, a music teacher at Woodside Elementary after taking a Positive Discipline in the Classroom Class with Casey O’Roarty, Certified Positive Discipline Trainer.

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Tool Card in Action: First Grade Teacher in Colombia

Salome is an excellent student, usually among the top-five in terms of performance in all academic areas. Consequently, I was very surprised when I saw that she received a score of 63 on a science quiz related to the water cycle. It is very usual for students of excellence to have negative reactions when they receive the occasional low grade, however to my surprise, Salome demonstrated curiosity. She sat down at her desk and immediately began going over her quiz in an almost cheerful manner. She approached me a few times to say, "Teacher, I don't understand this part" or "Teacher, could you explain this to me?" I told her to let me know when she would be ready to take the quiz and after about 20 minutes she let me know that she was ready.

I gave her the quiz and she completed it quickly and left to enjoy the rest of her recess. I was able to grade her quiz right away and saw to my delight that she scored 100% on the make-up. I was so impressed with her composure and maturity at the age of seven, I wanted to share her story with the other girls in the class.

As I mentioned before it is not uncommon to have girls cry over their grades or to sulk and even to express fear to show the grade to their parents. As a result, teaching the lesson that mistakes are something to learn from rather than to fear has been an ongoing lesson in our classroom. So as soon as the girls returned from recess I held up her two tests and showed the girls that even girls who usually get 100% on everything occasionally get bad grades; in short, everybody makes mistakes. I told them that Salome reacted in such a positive way and embraced the opportunity to learn from her mistakes and by doing that she was truly able to understand the material and to obtain such a good result. The girls were equally impressed as I was and they all clapped and cheered, celebrating her success.

Jade Fugini-Laws Gimnasio, Vermont School in Bogota-Colombia.

Tool Tips

1. Whenever possible, share your own mistakes.
2. If you don't make mistakes, fake it to model the fun of learning from mistakes.
3. Teach the 4 R's of Recovery from Mistakes to your students.
4. If the mistake requires amends or finding a solution, engage the student (or the whole class) in a plan for the best way to make amends or to brainstorm for solutions.
5. Collect stories you can share with your students where you followed the 4 R's of Recovery from Mistakes.
6. Share inspirational stories about great men and women who have made mistakes and learned from them, such as Edison who said, "I haven't failed, I found 10,000 ways that won't work."
7. Once a week, during class meetings, pass the talking stick around the circle and invite students to share a mistake they made, and what they learned from it.

What the Research Says:

Carol Dweck, a professor and researcher at Stanford University, has extensively studied learning as related to processing mistakes and failure.² In her research, Dweck found that students who perceive mistakes as an opportunity to learn and grow, are more successful long term compared to students with a fixed mindset. Individuals with fixed mindsets avoid difficult tasks because they fear making mistakes or not succeeding. Dweck points out that those students who are taught to embrace mistakes as opportunities to learn develop strategies that lead to great

² Carol Dweck. (2006). *Mindset*.

academic and personal success. These students seem to have a greater sense of self-efficacy and motivation for taking on more difficult tasks.

Kornell, Hays, and Bjork³ reported that students who made mistakes on tests demonstrated enhanced learning. Their findings show that taking on more challenging tasks—and making errors actually provides a deeper opportunity for learning. Other researchers⁴ identify the important role of mistakes in developing self-discipline. Students have to be allowed to make mistakes in order to grow and learn.

³ Kornell, Hays, Bjork. (2009). *Unsuccessful retrieval attempts enhance subsequent learning*. American Psychological Association.

⁴ Freiberg, Huzinec, & Templeton. (2009). *Classroom Managemetn—A Pathway to Student Achivement: A Study of Fourteen Inner-city Elementary Schools*. Elementary School Journal.