

## MISTAKES ARE WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

An excerpt from Chapter Two of [\*Positive Discipline\*](#) by Jane Nelsen

In our society we are taught to be ashamed of mistakes. We are all imperfect. What we need to achieve is the courage to change our debilitating beliefs about imperfection. This is one of the most encouraging concepts, and yet one of the hardest to achieve in our society. There isn't a perfect human being in the world, yet everyone is demanding it of themselves and others—especially children.

Close your eyes and remember the messages you received from parents and teachers about mistakes when you were a child. What were those messages? To make this exercise more powerful, you may want to write them down. When you made a mistake, did you receive the message that you were stupid, inadequate, bad, a disappointment, a klutz? Close your eyes again and let yourself remember a specific time when you were being berated for a mistake. What were you deciding about yourself and about what to do in the future? Remember, you were not aware that you were making a decision at the time; but when you look back it is usually obvious what decisions you were making. Some people decide they are bad or inadequate. Others decide they should not take risks for fear of humiliation if their efforts fall short of perfection. As discussed above, too many decide to become *approval junkies* and try to please adults at great cost to their self-esteem. And some decide they will be sneaky about their mistakes and do everything they can to avoid getting caught. Are these healthy messages and decisions that encourage productive life skill development? Of course not.

When parents and teachers give children negative messages about mistakes, they usually mean well. They are trying to motivate children to do better *for their own good*. They haven't taken time to think about the long term results of their methods. So much parenting and teaching is based on fear. Adults fear they aren't doing a good job if they don't *make* children do better. Too many are more concerned about what the neighbors will think than about what their children are learning. Others are afraid that children will never learn to do better if they don't instill them with fear and humiliation. Most are afraid because they don't know what else to do--and fear that if they don't inflict blame, shame and pain, they will be acting permissively. Often adults cover up their fear by *acting* more controlling.

There is another way. It is not permissive, and it truly motivates children to do better without paying the price of a lowered sense of self-worth. We need to learn and teach children to be excited about *mistakes as opportunities to learn*. Wouldn't it be wonderful to hear an adult say to a child, "You made a mistake. That is fantastic. What can we learn from it?" And I do mean we. We are partners

in many of the mistakes made by children. Many mistakes are made because we haven't taken *time for training* and *encouragement*. We often provoke rebellion instead of inspiring improvement. Model the courage to accept imperfection so that children will learn from you that mistakes truly are an opportunity to learn.

Children learn to see and practice mistakes as opportunities to learn during family and class meetings (discussed in later chapters). Many families have found it helpful to invite everyone to share a mistake of the day and what they learned from it during dinner time. Once a week during a class meeting (held on a daily basis) some teachers allow time for every student to share a mistake and what they learned from it. Children need daily exposure to the value of mistakes – and learning from them in a safe environment.

Another primary theme of this book, one that you will hear over and over, is learning how to use discipline challenges as opportunities to learn. First, however, adults need to change any negative beliefs about mistakes they may have so they can *model* what Rudolf Dreikurs called *the courage to be imperfect*. Using the three Rs of Recovery is an excellent way to model the courage to be imperfect

### **THE THREE Rs OF RECOVERY FROM MISTAKES**

1. Recognize-- "Wow! I made a mistake."
2. Reconcile-- "I apologize."
3. Resolve-- "Let's work on a solution together."

It is much easier to take responsibility for a mistake when it is seen as a learning opportunity rather than something bad. If we see mistakes as bad we tend to feel inadequate and discouraged and may become defensive, evasive, judgmental, or critical—of ourselves or others. On the other hand, when mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn, recognizing them will seem like an exciting venture. "I wonder what I will learn from this one." Self-forgiveness is an important element of the first R of Recovery.

Have you ever noticed how forgiving children are when we are willing to apologize? Have you ever said you were sorry to a child? If so, how did that child respond? I ask this question during lectures all over the world, and the response is universal. When adults sincerely apologize, children almost always say, "That's okay, Mom" (or Dad, or Teacher.) Children can be feeling angry and resentful in response to disrespectful behavior one minute (and adults probably deserve it) and switch to total forgiveness as soon as the adult says, "I am sorry."

The first two Rs of Recovery--recognize and reconcile--create a connection before the third R, working on solutions. Trying to work on solutions before creating a connection is totally non-productive.

Just like most adults and children, even when I *know* better, I don't always *do* what I know. As human beings it is common for us to become emotionally *hooked* and lose our common sense. We revert to our reptilian brains, and reptiles eat their young. We then *thoughtlessly react* instead of *acting thoughtfully*. One thing I love about the Positive Discipline principles is that no matter how many mistakes I make, and no matter how many messes I create with my mistakes; I can always go back to the principles, learn from my mistakes, clean up the mess I made -- and make things better than they had been before the mistakes.

Since I make so many mistakes, the Three Rs of Recovery is one of my favorite concepts. My signature example is the time I said to my then eight-year-old daughter, "Mary, you are a spoiled brat." (Does that sound like kindness, firmness, dignity, and respect?)

Mary, who is very familiar with the Three Rs of Recovery, retorted, "Well, don't tell me later that you are sorry."

In total reaction, I said, "You don't have to worry, because I'm not."

Mary ran to her bedroom and slammed the door. I soon reverted back to my rational brain, realized what I had done, and went to her bedroom to apologize. She was still angry, and was not ready for an apology. She had her copy of an early edition of *Positive Discipline* and was very busy underlining with a big, black marking pen. I looked over her shoulder and saw that she had scribbled "phony" in the column.

I left the room thinking, "Oh dear, there will probably be another *Mommy Dearest* book hitting the market any day." I knew I had made a huge mistake.

In about five minutes Mary came to me, timidly put her arms around me and said, "I'm sorry, Mama."

I said, "Honey, I'm sorry too. In fact, when I called you a spoiled brat, I was being one. I was upset at you for losing control of your behavior, but I had lost control of my own behavior. I am so sorry."

Mary said, "That's okay, I was acting like a brat."

I said, "Well, I can see what I did to provoke you to act that way."

Mary said, "Well, I can see what I did."

I have seen this happen over and over. When adults take responsibility for what they did to create a conflict (and, any conflict takes at least two) children are usually willing to follow this modeling and take responsibility for their part. Children learn accountability when they have models of accountability.

A few days later I overheard Mary on the phone saying to her friend, "Oh Debbie, you are so stupid!" Mary quickly realized what she had done and said, "I'm sorry Debbie. When I call you stupid, that means I am being stupid."

Mary had internalized the principles of Recovery and learned that mistakes are nothing more than wonderful opportunities to learn.