

## Mistakes as Opportunities for Learning

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

Rudolf Dreikurs<sup>1</sup>

*Mistakes are not nearly as important as what we do about it afterwards."*

Dreikurs



"WELL, AM I WITHIN THE MARGIN OF ERROR?"

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, capability, and 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 mistakes.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 in Action from Paris, France**

I was going to help a teacher implement Positive Discipline in her class. The students are 9-years-old. When I arrived in the school that day, all the little girls come to me in the playground (it was recess time) like little birds around me, all talking at the same time telling me that there is a thief in the classroom. I suggested we discuss it during a class meeting.

During the class meeting, they explained that a thief stole the ball from the positive time out place. So I ask them, "When we make a mistake are do we become the mistake we make?"

All at the same time they replied, "No, we do not!!!"

Then I said, "When you say there is a thief, you are saying that the person is the mistake they made. But the mistake is what the person did, not who they are. If someone stole the ball, how do you think they feel?"

They answered that the person must feel just awful. They must totally regret having done that. I was starting to prepare for the child to be able to give back the ball at a time when no one was looking, when, surprising everyone, a child raised his hand with the ball in it and said, "I took it. I'm sorry."

All the other children looked at him and said, "Wow this is really courageous of you. Thank you for giving it back."

He said, "I really liked it and now I realize that it was not okay to do that."

I was in awe to see that the child felt safe enough, that he knew that making a mistake was an opportunity to learn and that he could recover from it.

Nadine Gaudin, Preschool and Elementary Teacher

### **Tool in Action from Seattle, 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade African Drumming concert tonight and had been spending music class practicing with the students. One of my most talented 4<sup>th</sup> 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, 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.”

At that moment everything we had been discussing and practicing finally clicked—not only with this 4<sup>th</sup> grader, but also with many students. I stop myself or breathe and think about the child before I get upset.

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

### **Tool Tips:**

1. True discipline helps children learn from their mistakes. Punishment makes children pay for their mistakes.
2. Model and teach the 4 R’s of Recovery from Mistakes.
3. Post the 4 Steps for Recovery from Mistakes where students can use them to learn from mistakes in ways that are respectful and encouraging.
4. Share stories with your students where you followed the 4 R’s of Recovery from Mistakes.
5. 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.
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.<sup>2</sup> 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 students who are taught to embrace mistakes as opportunities to learn develop strategies that lead to greater academic and personal success. These students seem to have a higher sense of self-efficacy and motivation for taking on more difficult tasks.

Kornell, Hays, and Bjork<sup>3</sup> reported that students who made mistakes on tests demonstrated enhanced learning when error are evaluated as opportunities for learning. Their findings show that taking on more challenging tasks—and making errors actually provides a deeper opportunity for learning. Other researchers<sup>4</sup> identify the important role of mistakes in developing self-discipline. Students have to be allowed to make mistakes in order to grow and learn.

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<sup>2</sup> Carol Dweck. (2006). *Mindset*.

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

<sup>4</sup> Freiberg, Huzinec, & Templeton. (2009). *Classroom Management—A Pathway to Student Achievement: A Study of Fourteen Inner-city Elementary Schools*. Elementary School Journal.