



RULE

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Model Mistakes

Five-year-old Colin hated to make mistakes. When he tripped and stubbed his toe, he would blame his sister. When he sneaked jelly beans from a bag of birthday treats he would say: “She made me do it.” Colin’s habit of blaming others whenever he did something wrong drove his mother crazy.

Tristan, age three, walked off the playground by himself. His teacher found him, explained the mistake, and told him he needed to stay on the playground. His reaction was to freeze. For the rest of the day, he hardly moved and became absolutely silent.

Renegade Reason

Model making mistakes in front of children. Seeing you goof up helps kids accept themselves, keep trying, and take responsibility.

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Big Bird has been helping kids like Colin and Tristan for years. He sings a *Sesame Street* song encouraging kids to accept mistakes as part of living. You can still listen online to Jeff Moss’s classic song

“Everyone Makes Mistakes”: *Big people, small people, matter of fact, all people. Everyone makes mistakes, so why can't you?*

Many kids have a hard time accepting mistakes. Some deny them: “Not me!” Some blame others. Some freeze up and stop taking chances for fear they’ll commit another dreaded mistake. When it comes to mistakes, kids often get blinders. They see their own mistakes vividly, but don’t notice other people’s. Simply pointing out mistakes when you see them can be a huge help.

Renegade Blessings

Saving face is sometimes the number one priority for young kids. When you teach them about mistake making, the lessons can last a lifetime.

I might make a mistake sometimes. That’s OK.
It’s not just kids who make mistakes. Everyone does, even
my mom and dad.
When I do make a mistake, I might feel terrible, but I
know how to cope.
I can accept responsibility for my mistakes and try to fix
them.
I won’t stop trying just because I might not be perfect.

Why It Works

It’s no wonder kids often react strongly to mistakes. They are constantly trying new things and living with adults who seem to do the same tasks so seamlessly. Pour milk? No problem. Stack a tower? Easy. Put on a shirt with buttons? Five seconds. Mistakes happen every day for a child—whether he crosses a behavior boundary (hits his sister) or spills his milk.

“Children need models more than they need critics,” said Joseph Joubert, French philosopher from the 1700s. It’s long been known that children learn through imitation: watching someone else and repeating the behavior. Modeling is a great way to teach kids to accept mistakes in a healthy way, say parenting authors Laura Davis and Janis Keyser. Children watch us intently. When we are vocal about our own mistakes, kids learn how to cope with being “wrong” and making amends. How we deal with a mistake is more important than the mistake itself.

Some children feel shame when they make mistakes, either from the mistake itself or from the way we react. Shame is an inner feeling of “I’m a bad person.” It attacks self-worth. Kids may react by lashing out, avoiding, hiding, or denying the mistake to protect themselves. A healthier feeling for kids to develop is guilt, which includes regret and remorse, and the desire to fix a mistake rather than avoid it. Psychologists such as June Price Tangney say parents can help kids avoid shame and develop a healthy attitude toward mistakes.

Take Off Your Adult Lenses

Our first instinct is often to moralize when children blame others. We tell them not to lie. We might give them a lecture about responsibility. That’s not what kids need. It’s common for kids to be mistake averse. Concentrate on their feelings first. Help children realize they are not alone—everyone makes mistakes, even you. Model your missteps and help kids take action to make amends when they goof up.

Shame and Making Mistakes

A mistake carries with it a mix of feelings, and some kids feel these powerfully. They may feel shame, anger at themselves, frustration, sadness, guilt, or hopelessness.

When your child spills her milk or rips her brother’s picture, help

her learn to acknowledge, accept, and make amends for mistakes. This is no easy lesson. How many of us as adults can admit our mistakes immediately and openly, and then make up for them? This is another life skill that serves our families and communities well, yet takes years of practice. The easiest way to accept mistakes and keep your cool as an adult is to learn it from an early age.

How we deal with mistakes is more important than the mistake itself.

Fear of mistake making hits some kids harder than others. Mistakes are often hardest for boys, only children, and firstborns. As psychologist William Pollack, author of *Real Boys*, writes, boys are “shame-phobic.” Many boys will do just about anything to avoid losing face. They are also typically interested in all things powerful, which makes them averse to shame. Firstborns and only children often feel more pressure to do things right. When kids live in an all-adult household, they may see themselves constantly failing as they compare themselves to the grown-ups around them.

Model Making Mistakes

As a child, my brother, Scott, hated to make mistakes. My mother noticed what really bugged him was being observed. He hated the shame of it. If he was going to make a mistake, he wanted to do it privately. One day at preschool, Scott fell backward into a pan of water. He howled. It wasn't just being wet and dirty. He hated the shame of making a mistake, and this embarrassment was mixed in with fear: Would Mom get angry?

For children who are mistake averse, modeling can be an enormous help. Teachers at the School for Young Children advised my

mother to teach Scott it was OK to make mistakes by opening up about hers.

“Oh no, I made a mistake and all the markers fell,” she would announce loudly. “I just have to pick them up.”

Other days she would stamp her foot for emphasis. “Oh! I made a mistake!” she would holler. “It’s OK to make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes: kids and teachers, moms and dads.”

As my mother stopped hiding all the little mistakes she made every day, Scott eased up on himself. Finally, he was able to admit a mistake, too.

Model making mistakes in front of children.

Kids are always within earshot, listening, watching. Once you start announcing your mistakes, it’s amazing how many pile up in a day: spilling coffee, forgetting the car keys, running late, misplacing your cell phone. Fortunately, most of them are little, and easy to announce and resolve. Give your child a vocabulary to express disappointment and move on: Oh no! Darn! Rats! Oops! Uh-oh! I made a mistake! Silly me. Oh, well. I guess now I’ll have to . . .

Admitting a mistake takes courage. Help your kids get into the habit.

My son, Myles, tried to write long before his fingers could manage a pen. Often he fell short and raged at himself. Striving for perfection is something he may well struggle with his whole life. I knew I had to model mistake making around Myles as much as possible. Starting when he was two, I made sure to vocalize my daily mistakes. Soon he was hearing a litany of oopses from me.

Getting kids to recognize that making a mistake is not a calamity is a huge first step. Knowing how to fix the mistake may take adult help. Does fixing the mistake involve a sponge? An apology? A new attempt at a drawing? But the day will come when your child not only admits a mistake, but calmly comes up with a solution. My reward came when I heard Myles's voice from his bedroom:

“Oh, no! I made a mistake!” Pause. “Silly Myles. Now I need tape.”

Try This—Add to Your Toolbox

Don't create a perfect facade. Let your child see how often you mess up and what you do about it. Model mistake making when your child is within earshot. Modeling might help you accept your own imperfections, too.

1. Announce your mistakes

“Oh, no! I made a mistake!”

2. State what went wrong

“I spilled coffee on the table.”

3. Accept your mistakes

“Oh, well. That happens sometimes. Everybody makes mistakes, even dads.”

4. Explain how you can fix it

“Now I have to get the sponge and clean it up.”

Despite all the spills and mess, let your child try things on her own as much as possible. Rushing to the rescue with an “I'll do it for you” can send the message that only perfection will do.

As kids grow, mistakes may get more complex, often involving social missteps. Instead of spilling paint, it may be a mistake involving gossip and hurt feelings. As adults, despite our best intentions, we do this, too. When I made a social gaffe recently, I knew my kids were watching me. I was angry at myself and was in no mood to model, but I summoned up my most gracious self. What's most important is demonstrating how to admit a mistake and make amends.

Words to Say

MODELING MISTAKES

Uh-oh! I made a mistake.

Rats! Darn! Oops! Uh-oh!

I spilled coffee on my grocery list.

Sorry, you're right. I was wrong.

I shouldn't have said that. This would be kinder.

That didn't work the way I wanted.

Silly me.

Sometimes that happens.

Oh, well.

Hmm. What could I do? How could we fix this?

I guess now I'll have to get a new piece of paper.

EMPATHY AND INFORMATION

Even mamas make mistakes sometimes.

Let me tell a story about a mistake I made when

I was four.

It's not easy to pour milk.

I still love you even though you made a mistake.

It was an accident. Sometimes we do things and we wish we hadn't.

Everyone makes mistakes. Moms and dads, kids and teachers and grandmas.

When we make a mistake we can set it right.

Words to Avoid

There's nothing to be upset about.

What did I tell you? Look at the mess you made.

Colin! Don't be so clumsy. That's the third time you've spilled milk today.

Why are you lying to me? I know you did it.

You can't do anything right.

Here, I'll do it for you.

Your Take

Mistake making is one more area where you can help your child cope with negative emotions and develop resilience for life. Of course, if you're visiting Aunt Hattie, whose house is impeccably clean, it's not the best time for your child to practice pouring milk. Allow plenty of time for that at home (put liquids in a small plastic measuring cup with spout) and say, "I know you usually pour your milk, but at this house I'm going to do it." Also, many people don't like their mistakes pointed out. Highlight your own, but don't amplify others'.