

Mistakes: Experiences from which to Learn or Feel Defeated? Part II

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In my last newsletter I continued my discussion of the characteristics of successful people by examining the ways in which they deal with mistakes and failures. I noted that as a father, clinical psychologist, educator, youth sports coach, and consultant I have been very interested in how children and adults understand and respond to mistakes in their lives. I strongly believe that one's response to failure or to the possibility of failure is a strong indication of a person's sense of self-worth and feelings of competence.

Last month I focused on the strategies that educators might use to lessen the fear of failure in our youth. This month's newsletter is dedicated to what parents can do to help their children be less fearful about mistakes and setbacks.

I should emphasize a point I have made in several previous articles about the concept of success. When I refer to people as successful I am not using as the main criteria their accumulated wealth or social status but rather the extent to which they are comfortable and content with their personal and professional lives, their compassion and generosity, their ability to handle adversity, and the ease with which they relate to others.

I noted that one framework that has provided me with guideposts to assess the ways in which we understand and respond to both mistakes and successes is attribution theory. This theory, originally proposed by psychologist Bernard Weiner, highlights that whether we are aware of it or not, we assume different reasons for why we succeed and fail and that these reasons are directly related to our self-esteem and confidence.

More specifically, successful people believe that mistakes provide opportunities for learning and future success. They attribute mistakes to conditions that can be changed. For instance, if children with high self-esteem fail a test that they believe was within their ability to pass, they will seek out the assistance of teachers or parents and/or develop more effective strategies for studying and learning. If they are playing

basketball and an opposing player drives by them to score, they will listen closely to the coach about how to be a more effective defensive player in the future. It is not that they say in a jubilant voice, "I am happy to make mistakes so that I can learn." However, they do not experience failure as proof that they are failures. They view mistakes as expected occurrences.

In contrast, youngsters with low self-esteem are more likely to assume that they cannot modify situations in which they made mistakes, resigning themselves to the belief that they will continue to fail and that success is illusory. In my role as a youth basketball coach a child once told me, "I will never make a foul shot." He was convinced that he would never be able to do so, a perception that limited the probability of success in the future.

As a psychologist I have heard a wide spectrum of remarks reflecting a sense of hopelessness in youngsters when confronted with failure or the possibility of failure. Some are direct expressions of very low self-esteem while others represent self-defeating attempts to escape from a sense of failure. Such remarks include:

"Why should I try to study? I will fail anyway."

"Everyone is better than I am in spelling. Things will never get better."

"My saxophone is bad, that's why I can't learn to play."

"My parents did not buy me the right kind of glue. If they did, the model plane I made would not be broken."

If we subscribe to the basic tenets of attribution theory then we can ask the following question, "How do I say and do things with my children so that they will develop a healthy attitude towards mistakes and setbacks, that they will learn that mistakes are expected and accepted?" I would like to share some thoughts about what parents can do to nurture a positive mindset in children about mistakes.

Serve as a Model: Children are astute observers of the ways in which their parents handle mistakes. As parents we have countless

opportunities to model for our children a healthy attitude towards making mistakes and dealing with setbacks. It is for this reason that I often ask parents how they think their children would answer the following question, "What do your parents do when they make mistakes?" At some point I would like to write a book titled, "Children's Perceptions of How Their Parents Deal with Mistakes." Many parents at my workshops have half-joking, half-not, said, "Please don't ask my kids that question."

I do ask it. The following are some of the negative responses I have gathered from children:

"They yell and scream at each other. They blame each other."

"They say, 'What's the use' and give up."

"My dad said a word he always tells me not to say."

"My mom got angry at me for not wanting to join the soccer team because I thought I wasn't good enough. Yet, when she was asked to give a talk for the Rotary Club in our town she made up an excuse that she was busy. I think she was afraid, so why get angry with me for something that she does?"

"I hate when my dad does something wrong since he usually blames me. Like one time he went through a red light and got a ticket and then said to me and my brother that our arguing caused him not to pay attention."

One of my all-time favorites was the response offered by a young boy when asked his parents' reaction to mistakes. He said, "What's a double martini?" Obviously his parents are not serving as effective models.

On the positive side, I have heard:

"When my dad tries to fix something in the house and it doesn't work, he loves to joke and say, 'I better pay attention to what I'm doing.' Usually, after that he does an okay job."

"My mom once burned the food when my parents were having guests over. I thought she was going to be really upset but she said to my dad, 'I guess we'll have to order out.' My dad laughed. Their friends weren't even upset about it and they were all joking about times they had burned food."

"My dad was having problems with a project at work. You could tell it was on his mind but when he was playing chess with me at night, he seemed not to think of work. A few days later he said it was solved. He really seemed confident."

While modeling certain behaviors as a parent doesn't guarantee our children will follow in our footsteps, we must remember that we are their primary teachers and children pay close attention to our reactions to various situations.

Use Mistakes as Teachable Moments: If we want our children to develop the belief that mistakes are experiences from which to learn, then we must reinforce this belief day in and day out by our response to their mistakes. Thus, another one of my favorite questions that I ask parents to consider is how their children would answer the following, "When you make a mistake, when something doesn't go right, what do your parents say and do?" Reflect upon how your children would answer this question.

Although most parents have told me that they want their children to learn from mistakes, often out of frustration and anger parents say and do things that work against this goal. The following represent comments offered by children when describing how their parents respond to their mistakes, beginning with a few negative examples:

"I spilled a glass of milk in a restaurant and my mother slapped my hand and said, 'You are so clumsy. You never pay attention.'"

"Whenever I try something and it doesn't work, my father says, 'I told you it wouldn't work.'" (In this particular instance, the boy's father said to me in therapy that he was very concerned that his son gave up very

easily when he couldn't do something. Yet the father had little appreciation of how his response to his son was communicating a lack of trust in his son's ability to stick with things and succeed.)

"I caught two touchdown passes in my Pop Warner football game. I missed one pass. When I came off the field I couldn't believe my father's response. Maybe he thought he was helping me but it hurt. He said, 'How come you dropped that pass?' He didn't even mention the two touchdown passes I caught."

A girl with learning problems said that her parents continue to exhort her "to try harder" when she feels she is already expending as much energy as she can.

In contrast, what follows are a few positive examples:

"My parents encourage me to try new things and remind me that if it doesn't work out, it's not the end of the world."

"My mom is always there when I need help with something I have trouble doing. But she says she will help me but not do it for me. Sometimes I want her to do it for me but I know that she feels with her help I can learn to do it myself."

"Before my dad taught me to ride a two-wheel bike he took out a videotape of when he was learning to ride a two-wheeler. We laughed at all the times he fell down. Then he said, 'Somehow I still learned to ride. I'm sure you'll fall also.' His mom and dad were on the tape and gave him a big hug. I guess I felt less worried about learning to ride after seeing the tape."

What will make it easier for us to use mistakes as teachable moments? There are a number of possibilities. I would like to highlight three.

Be Empathic. In all of my workshops and writings I emphasize the importance of empathy. The reader may wish to refer to my two newsletters about empathy that appeared on my website (February and

March, 1999) for a more in-depth discussion of the topic. As parents if we wish to become more empathic and help our children deal more effectively with mistakes we should be guided by several questions:

"When I say or do things with my children that pertain to making mistakes, what do I hope to accomplish?"

"Am I saying or doing these things in a way that my children will be most likely to listen to and learn from me?" This question is very important. As we have seen, while many parents would answer the first question by saying they want their children to feel they can learn from mistakes, some respond in ways that result in their children feeling humiliated and intimidated and more fearful of making mistakes.

"Would I want anyone to respond to my mistakes the way I respond to my children's setbacks?" If the answer is no, then change the way you react to your children.

Have Realistic Expectations. In my career I have seen the negative impact that unrealistic expectations have on children. As I noted in the five articles I wrote for my website last spring pertaining to the temperamental differences in children, our expectations for our children must be based upon their particular temperament and learning styles. For example, I worked with a family whose nine-year-old son had difficulty with attention and learning. Although the parents said they understood the nature of his problems, they did not respond as if they did. Instead, they felt that if he studied more and was more consistent his grades would be better.

However, this child was already expending much energy in learning and was mentally exhausted. His parents' expectations that he could complete as much work as his peers was unrealistic given his learning problems. Instead of offering support, their frustration as well as their belief that he was not trying hard enough led them to punish him for his mistakes on spelling and math tests. In response this boy became increasingly angry and resentful and felt there was nothing he could do to please his parents.

Relatedly, we must be careful that our expectations do not place children in situations where the likely outcome is failure. We can advise children they will learn from mistakes. However, if they constantly make mistakes and do not experience success because we do not take into consideration their unique temperament and learning style, they will begin to flee from those tasks that they perceive as leading to failure. As one boy poignantly told me, "If you're supposed to learn from your mistakes then I should be a genius since I have made so many."

Prepare Your Children for Mistakes. I believe that parents can prepare their children for the possibility that mistakes will occur, thereby lessening fears associated with possible setbacks. This can be accomplished with carefully selected comments at carefully selected times. Several examples were offered earlier in this article such as the father who showed his son a videotape of himself falling numerous times as he learned to ride a two-wheel bike or the child whose parents said it's not the end of the world if we try something and it doesn't work.

Preparing children for mistakes should not be confused with introducing a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure. What will insure that it is not experienced as a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure are our comments that if things do not work out there are other strategies we can use. Thus, our children hear the message that many possibilities exist for reaching our goals.

In summary, we can adopt a problem-solving approach with our children in which we convey the belief that all children will make mistakes whether on a test, in a sporting event, in a play, or in building a model. In a low-keyed manner we can communicate that when setbacks occur, we can figure out what will help to correct them. We can also offer realistic hope by articulating the belief that a task that is too difficult at this point may not present as great an obstacle in the future.

Children who are not paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes or failing are the youngsters who will grow up willing to take appropriate risks and willing to confront challenges. They will experience many opportunities to enjoy life rather than spending most of their time and energy running from possible failure. If we as adults are to help children develop this positive outlook, we must possess a healthy attitude about making

mistakes. In my next newsletter I will discuss what we can do as adults to develop a positive mindset about the role of mistakes in our own lives.

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