



Parent Pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

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From “Oops” to “Aha!”

Professional athletes and musicians practice skills over and over until they can do them perfectly. This is how they become experts. What we often forget is that these experts made many mistakes along the way. Whether on the field, with an instrument or in a classroom, if you aren't making mistakes, you probably aren't learning anything new.

It is not God's will for us to sin or make mistakes. He created a perfect world, and His Law indicates that He expects perfection from His children. Yet God knew that perfection was not possible, which is why He sent His Son to save us from our imperfections — our sins. He sent Jesus to obey the Law in our place and to take the punishment we deserve for sinning. He also sent His Spirit and gave us the Bible to guide us in the processes of repentance and learning.

This provides a model of relying on God for salvation and relying on God to help us grow in grace. Part of growing in grace is learning from mistakes so that we can realize the beauty of God's plan for us. We don't want to sin or to make mistakes, but we know we will. It is better to examine the mistake, learn from it and accept God's help in improving.

When we acknowledge mistakes, we admit guilt and accept forgiveness. Forgiveness means we move on from shame to a state of learning. When we apply this idea to mistakes made in learning, we can begin to see the potential that errors have for teaching us.

When we sin against a neighbor and hurt him, we can either ignore the mistake or own up to it and learn. When we receive forgiveness and work to improve our behavior toward the person we have offended, we have learned a strong lesson in empathy, which will have a positive effect on future encounters with the neighbor and with others. This same pattern can happen in the classroom. Ignored mistakes do not teach; acknowledged mistakes do teach.

Students who see mistakes in this way tend to learn better and faster. They are more willing to tackle something

challenging, since they know that learning from mistakes is the way to improve. This helps children develop a healthy mindset for growth and encourages them to think about what they can do to improve their learning, rather than simply waiting to be taught. Students who feel they must hide mistakes see mistakes as shameful and hopeless. These children will avoid challenges, as they see no good coming from doing anything other than what they already know they are good at doing.

Our current school climate does not encourage learning from mistakes. There is a strong emphasis on testing and measuring to see if students have met core standards or benchmarks. In this atmosphere, mistakes have only a negative implication. While standards and testing can give us important information about student progress, it is also good to look at progress over time. When you help your child to examine mistakes and plan a different course of action, you are giving him an opportunity to see improvement, not just measure his standing against that of other students.



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One thing a parent can do to help a child learn from mistakes is to encourage the child to try challenging things. Then when mistakes happen, you can help her to evaluate what happened and make a plan to try something different. Even in the face of a mistake, this scenario will do much to improve your child's self-confidence. What you have done is to give a high ability cue. Your child develops confidence because she has tried something difficult and managed to survive making a mistake. She is also made aware that her parents have confidence in her ability to grow and learn.

It is equally important to praise effort over performance. While any parent is pleased to see a good grade on a project, it is also essential to point out how much work went into the good grade. This is a reminder to your child that effort results in learning. Children praised only for performance can learn to value only the grade. This can lead to feeling entitled to a grade or to complete only the minimum amount of work. A desire to be a lifelong learner who masters subject matter is a much more effective goal.

Another factor that supports learning from mistakes is for a child to have a coping model. When your child sees you make a mistake, he will watch how you handle things and learn from your reaction. If your child sees you own up to your mistake, evaluate it and make it right, your child will learn that mistakes should be examined and not hidden. This kind of modeling will strengthen your child in terms of academic learning and emotional development, as he learns how to stay calm when things do not go as planned.

Similarly, you can make a difference at your child's school. Teachers and administrators are challenged to try to balance



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current practices in testing with creating a productive learning environment for children. It is great when parents help maintain that balance by showing support for projects and other learning experiences that cannot be defined by core standards or measured by achievement testing. Those big projects, as well as the work that is done in music and art classes, are experiences that give children the opportunity to try new things, make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. These are valuable lessons.

For further study

Watch Diana Laufenberg's TED Talk "How to learn? From mistakes" (www.ted.com/talks/diana_laufenberg_3_ways_to_teach.html).

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Writer: Kim Marxhausen **Editor:** Ed Grube **Designer:** Carolyn Niehoff

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