

Can you allow your children to make mistakes?

Imagine: Your four-year-old has taken some of your make-up and denies it completely even though you found it in her room under some dirty clothes.

Imagine: Your ten-year-old's teacher has called saying that he hasn't handed in homework for the past week.

Imagine: Your sixteen-year-old and friends have been stopped by the police. Marijuana was found in the car.

Kids make a lot of mistakes in the growing up process—sometimes big ones. How can we *allow* them to learn from their mistakes?

When something goes wrong, we are quick to accuse and blame our kids. We make assumptions about why they did it, and catastrophize that we are raising a thief and a liar, the corner bum asking for spare change, or the next serial killer. Those fears naturally cause us to react. Never are those reactions helpful to our child's success handling the mistake.

Therefore our kids usually don't get the chance to make a mistake, learn how to rectify it, and move on without blame or shame. One mistake and we are on them, suspicious, thinking they're up to no good, that they are untrustworthy and must prove something to us before we will trust them again. Some children go out of their way to win that trust back. Too many others end up proving us right.

We think our anger and distrust will make them shape up. But human nature doesn't work that way. If a parent treats a child as if she is bad and can't be trusted, that is what she believes about herself. Depending on her temperament, she will either "be good" to get your approval, even though the message has sunk in, or she will resist the distrust, and fight back screaming that nobody understands her and become more and more devious—the self-fulfilling prophesy.

So how can we do it differently? Instead of sending the message that, "You've done wrong and now I can't trust you," send the message that, "You made a mistake. That's how we learn. I have made mistakes too, so I understand. I am here to support you in finding a way to rectify the mistake." This is not letting him "get away with it." On the contrary, this is the *only* way you will be able to help him truly take responsibility for his mistake. When you are reactive, he will be too. When you are responsive and non-blaming, you can talk about it, he will trust that you care, and you will find out what motivated the mistake—a crucial piece missing in handling most offenses.

When you can begin with, "You really wanted to play with my make-up," "I got a call from your teacher about homework, and I want to hear your side of the story first," or "This marijuana charge is pretty serious. You must have been very scared," your child knows right away that you care and are ready to listen. This allows him to talk.

No mistake happens for no reason. We must be willing to look at the motivation for the behavior, rather than simply punish it. Getting to the root cause (which will never emerge under blame and distrust) is the way to insure that that mistake will not happen again. When your child feels heard and still trusted—he gets the chance to learn something. Then and only then can you expect rectification of the problem that teaches responsibility.

“I’d like you to put the make-up back on my dresser. What can you do next time you really want it?”

“I get that this class is really boring for you. How can you get what you want out of it even if it’s just a passing grade? This is your education, not mine, not your teachers. You need to decide what you want to leave this class with and then know that it is your choice.” Or “This course is hard for you. Schools expect that you should do well at everything. That’s hard for most of us to live up to. What do you want to end up with in this class and how can you get there?”

“You must obey the law and take the consequences. I will help you follow this through. I know you didn’t mean for this to happen, but you probably didn’t expect to get stopped. What can you do in the future to think differently and make different decisions even when you are feeling pressured by your friends?”

Talk like this is hard to do when fears take over and we blame ourselves for not teaching our child properly. Mistakes are part of learning even when those mistakes come from bad judgment. Brains are not fully developed until adulthood. Teen judgment can be off—naturally, not intentionally.

Mistakes happen when we don’t know how to do something, don’t have the right information, make a bad decision, have our minds on something else, or want something badly enough. All understandable when fear is taken out of the picture. Mistakes turn into crimes when children believe they are untrustworthy and unacceptable. Then they look to other sources for their trust and acceptance.

We need to make sure that trust, acceptance and understanding come from us, not only their friends. And we need to allow mistakes to truly be mistakes.