“I think I can... I think I can…”:

How to manage children’s mistakes to nurture stick-to-itiveness and other 21st century skills

Most adults are familiar with the classic story The Little Engine That Could, how she kept talking to herself, assuring herself that she could do something that seemed almost unconquerable with her “I think I can, I think I can” attitude. This is a quality that adults hope each child in their care develops.

Unfortunately, adults also have a tendency to pressure children to do things right, to pay attention to the rules, to listen the first time, to not mess up. When a child makes a mistake, she is often afraid to admit it because she doesn’t want to disappoint or be punished for not meeting a standard. Ironically, among the standards that children will need to meet in order to succeed in the 21st century are the abilities to:

• view failure as an opportunity to learn
• assess own ideas in order to improve
• understand how parts impact one another
• deal positively with praise, setbacks and criticism
• solve new problems in both expected and innovative ways
• realize that creativity and innovation are long-term, cyclical processes of “small successes and frequent mistakes” (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009)

It is clear that inventors, philosophers, and teachers of past centuries knew the value that mistakes held in the long-term growth of a person or a culture. Prominent among those voices is Thomas Edison who said, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” Edison was not the only voice to take a positive approach to failure. Albert Einstein said, “Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.” And contemporary writer Phyllis Theroux comments, “Mistakes are the usual bridge between inexperience and wisdom.” (www.brainyquote.com)

Seeing that mistakes and failure have such an important place in the growth and success process, teachers need to respond in intentional ways when mistakes occur or when a child’s hopes are dashed in a failed experience. Key strategies have proven effective in supporting a child as he experiences the cycle of trial and error, of experimenting and trying again.

“Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible – the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family.” – Virginia Satir

Live-time feedback:

In the text Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century, researchers describe the power of the Law of Practice – a law that says skill development requires hundreds, sometimes thousands of rounds of practice. Early on, the practice demands much effort, with the learner often talking his way through the steps. Later practices are much easier, becoming almost automatic. This law of practice must be combined with the Knowledge of Results Law – “Individuals acquire a skill much more rapidly if they receive feedback about the correctness of what they have done. If incorrect, they need to know the nature of their mistake … practice without feedback produces little learning.” (National Research Council 2013)

Teachers should use descriptive feedback, describing exactly what they notice. Describe the attempts and the modifications. Describe the emotional effort as well. “I saw you rebuild that tower three times. The first time you had the big, heavy rectangular block on top. Then you tried the medium block, and finally you succeeded with the smaller arch.”

“Challenges are what make life interesting; overcoming them is what makes life meaningful.”

– Joshua J. Marine
Use language that invites “do-overs”:

Programs that value failures as part of the learning cycle have teachers who use supportive language. “It’s okay if it didn’t work. Often things don’t work. Would you like to try again? What else might you try?” or “We are all learning. I often have to practice something many times. If you’d like, you can try again…” or “Are you feeling sad about what happened? Would you like to say you are sorry to your friend and try again?” These teachers create safe spaces where children can make mistakes without fear of punishment.

Attention focusing Questions:

Asking good questions takes practice. Attention focusing questions lead a child to think about a specific thing, but they don’t have only one right answer. Daniel Loxton explains, “If you know the one right answer already, there’s nowhere else to go with the conversation. At the same time, though, very open-ended questions can be difficult to answer and can stall the conversation … Kids can sometimes be overwhelmed by these questions and end up just answering with a timid shoulder shrug or quiet silence while they try to figure out what you’re looking for.” Asking a focusing question like, “Tell me what you noticed about the sidewalks as you came in to school today,” can lead in surprising and fun directions. “Kids will often notice things that you haven’t.” (Loxton 2013)

Flexible classrooms:

Some programs have many rules and much structure. Reduce rules to the few most important ones so children have a sense of freedom within steady boundaries. Allowing children to use materials in varied ways or to move objects from one area in a room to another gives children a sense that exploring is okay. (Chaillé/Britain)

Get families on board:

In program handbooks, on classroom signs, in daily reports, teachers should give families messages that their program rewards effort, that growth comes after practice, and that most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time. Edison had it right! ”

Works Cited:


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