

Letting Your Toddler Make Mistakes

by

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Ever get the impression your toddler thinks he's just as big and powerful as you? Don't worry; it's not your imagination gone haywire. As far as he's concerned, he's the master of his own domain—until a few short years later when he comes face to face with the scrutiny, evaluation, and faultfinding from others. Unless we teach him how to see mistakes, defeats, and failures in a different light, our self-confident little dynamo will grow up feeling like he's being judged by everyone, strangers included. And after a few years of living under an electron microscope, imaginary or real, he'll start to assess his own performance, measure his self-worth, and shape his future choices through others' eyes, not his own. Once that happens, every blunder turns into a weapon that sabotages his self-esteem rather than a tool to help him make better decisions in the future.

Why does this happen? Simple. We're all pack animals, and toddlers are certainly no exception. (Heck, mine probably howl at the moon and roll around in disgusting stuff from time to time.) And like all pack animals, we have a strong need to belong to a group. However, kids seldom learn that this need can be satisfied in *two* ways—earning acceptance by offering unique contributions or roles that benefit the pack *or* begging for acceptance, making all choices contingent upon whatever will win them pack approval. By choosing compliance over contribution, kids see failure as the obstacle that keeps them from being welcomed into the fold.

When kids learn to fear failure, they resist making any choice that carries the risk of defeat and therefore humiliation. But if they shy away from learning new skills, taking on new adventures, taking positive social risks, or exploring the unknown, this “decision paralysis” can lead to underachievement. Instead of striving to reach their fullest potential, they learn to delegate their difficult choices to the media, their peers and the popular culture shaped by both. So unaccustomed are they to following their own inner compass, that as adolescents and adults they're no longer able to reason

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consciously and clearly. A poor sense of self-awareness allows inner dishonesty to strengthen so that self-deceit, excuses, denial, and rationalizations lower the threshold to irresponsible, even immoral choices. When this happens they're at the mercy of those whose values may not reflect the ones we've encouraged in them and influences that may not have their best interests at heart as we do.

As parents, we can raise our children to both welcome and learn from the mistakes they will surely make during their lives rather of being shattered by them. We can teach them see failure as steppingstones to success rather than events that determine their identity and self-worth. We can help them view defeat as a tool for personal growth rather than certain ostracism from the pack. With this new perception, children are unfettered in their pursuit of personal excellence, which, when it boils right down to it, is what we really want for them for them.

Here are some suggestions that will give your children these valuable tools:

- Never admonish yourself openly for a mistake. Instead, mention what solution you intend to use and what you learned from that mistake. "Oops, I burned the mashed potatoes again. I'll wash out this pan and start all over again. I guess I shouldn't try to cook and read magazines at the same time!"
- Never deny your children something they're good at as a consequence for misbehavior. For instance, if your toddler is very creative with building blocks and her favorite play activity is building shopping malls and suspension bridges with them, be sure not to punish her in this way, "Look at the mess you made with those paints! How am I ever going to get this off my newly painted walls? Sarah, you naughty girl! For that, you're not allowed to play with your blocks today." If Sarah is repeatedly denied what she excels in, eventually, she'll grow to shun goals altogether.
- Teach your children that there is no quota for failed attempts. There's progress and success to be found in each of them. If your toddler is trying to learn to button his shirt, try not to intervene unless he becomes overwhelmed. Point out the buttons he *did* manage to fasten. The next attempt, bring up how he keeps on trying. The

third attempt, point out how he correctly lined up some of them, and so on.

- Have weekly family mistake contests that your toddler can observe and eventually participate in when he's old enough. During dinner, you and the older children can share every mistake you've made during the day and then the entire family can vote on which ones offered the most valuable learning experience. By unmasking the advantages to each failure, children become more accepting of their own shortcomings and mistakes.
- Never bring up past mistakes. "Tommy, this is the third time you've tipped over your milk today."
- Teach children to develop "failure tolerance" by not over-reacting to their mistakes. Focus on the solution, not the problem or whose to blame.
- Encourage your children to do things on their own, whenever possible. We shouldn't rescue them from their struggles, settle their conflicts, or shelter them from challenges unless absolutely necessary. These actions send a message that they can't make choices or manage tasks without our help. It also suggests a perfect result is more important than the attempt, itself.
- Never compare your child to others. "Bobby, why can't you be a big boy like John and stop whining all the time?"
- Address the behavior, not the child: "Hitting is not allowed," instead of "Quit being so mean."
- Never openly belittle others for their mistakes, including strangers: characters on TV, drivers on the road, and so on.
- Always point out the successes inherent to every failure. If Megan spills the milk, point out how she got her own cup out of the cupboard, lifted the milk carton up by herself, and so on.
- Accept suffering as a good thing. When children struggle, they not only develop inner strength and compassion, but they also learn that suffering is something they can persevere and overcome.

Once our children use their mistakes and failures as a tool to help them learn and grow instead of weapons that sabotage their self-worth, imagine the repercussions! They'd be more willing to take the positive risks crucial developing important life skills—skills that will lead to independence, self-confidence, and the strength it takes to make choices based on their sense of right and wrong rather than their need for acceptance. In the end, we'll be blessed with children whose choices contribute good—not misery—to the world and the future.