

The Value of Mistakes

(transcript)

As you start working with your children, one thing will come up repeatedly: Mistakes. Children make lots of mistakes. Mistakes are incredibly valuable because they reveal where the child is struggling. The challenge is that most of us have been conditioned by school and by our parents to avoid making them. Therefore, mistakes trigger all sorts of yucky feelings inside of us: depending on our own childhood experiences, we might feel scared, hopeless, or irritated.

And when we get triggered and react, our children shut down. One of the top reasons why children stop wanting to work is because adults reactively point out their mistakes. And then people say: “Montessori doesn’t work, homeschooling is too hard, my child has no self-discipline, kids only learn through bribes and punishments...” and on and on. So why are we, as adults, so intent on getting our children to avoid making mistakes? It’s because we’ve been taught through many years of schooling that mistakes mean our child isn’t learning.

But, as A.M. Joosten, an AMI trainer, wrote: “One progresses by means of one’s mistakes. They can be means of development, not when somebody comes and corrects them, but when one is helped to see one’s imperfections and to overcome them oneself, gradually at one’s own pace. The function of the adult towards the child is that of helping the child to develop, not merely to erase mistakes. Simply [avoiding] mistakes...does not necessarily mean one develops.”

So, what Joosten is saying is that our job is not to point out or prevent mistakes, but to help our children develop the necessary awareness to identify and fix them on their own. Dr. Montessori realized early on the developmental importance of this process, and created materials that allowed children to notice and correct their own mistakes through a concept she called “control of error.”

Your job as a Montessori homeschooling parent is twofold: you need to identify and work through your triggers related to mistakes, while also learning about the materials and processes that will help you guide your child towards a friendly relationship with errors. It can sound like a lot, but if we want to raise children who can embrace mistakes as opportunities for growth, then our own growth in this area is essential. This is one of the hardest AND most transformational parts of the adult’s Montessori journey. And we’re here to travel it together.

Our underlying goal is to support development, and development happens when children do activities they enjoy. Now, there’s a HUGE misconception when it comes to Montessori education: Montessori doesn’t say children should only do what they like. She said that we should find a way for them to enjoy what they need to do. For example, I couldn’t get my eight-year-old son excited about reviewing the grammar symbols. BUT while we were doing an experiment from the “Nature of the Elements” series that involved a magnet, he said “I want to

do more experiments about magnetism.” So that gave me the idea to write up commands for doing little magnet experiments. I asked him to symbolize each sentence before moving on to the next, and my approach worked! He got to do some fun experiments and I got to assess his knowledge of grammar!

“Our primary concern is not that the child learns to do something without mistakes. Our real concern is that the child does what he needs, with interest.” - A.M. Joosten

Now, when presenting any activity, there are four very important steps to include:

Step #1: You need to show them how to handle the material correctly

Step #2: You need to show them what we do with it (in other words, what concept we’re exploring and what steps we need to take)

Step #3: You need to point out what we look at when we’re checking for accuracy

Step #4: You need to set them up with follow-up work or practice problems so they can work independently.

At first, step #3 - checking for accuracy - might not mean focusing on getting the right answer. It might mean only having one bead bar on the bottom row of the Checkerboard, or a one-digit number in each column when looking at the sum of a four-digit addition. But eventually, you’ll begin directing their interest towards getting the right answer. Some materials, like nomenclature cards, have a built-in control of error. Other activities require a chart, like in the case of math facts. And others call for an external tool, like a calculator to check long multiplication.

As you watch your child work independently, you’ll see them make mistakes. In fact, in Montessori circles, we say that if a child can do the activity perfectly the first time, you waited too long to present it. Your job is to decide if these mistakes reveal a **lack of clarity, a lack of capacity, or a lack of interest**. If they’re making mistakes because they lack clarity, meaning they’re still exploring the process, then it’s usually helpful to wait. “Waiting is the practical way of showing respect to the child’s interest,” Joosten wrote. We need to let our second plane children struggle and think through their challenges. This can be particularly hard in a homeschool setting, because you’re much more available to them than a classroom guide would be, and it’s tempting to jump in and “help”. So, what can you do while you wait? Anything that keeps you busy. Make materials, bake bread, write a book.

Now, if your child approaches you with a frustration, you can support their desire to think for themselves by asking questions about the process instead of telling them what they did wrong. You could say, “What are you noticing? Would you like to explore together why that’s happening?” And since your child initiated the exchange, they’ll be open to your feedback because it’s helping them reach their goal. Remember to keep your feedback objective, focused on the material and not on the child’s intelligence or abilities. And always model the correct approach, instead of pointing out what they’re doing wrong.

Sometimes mistakes stem not from a lack of clarity, but from a lack of capacity. This would be the case, for example, in a child who understands the process of long multiplication but hasn't yet mastered multiplication tables constantly chooses the wrong beads. In this scenario, you would follow the old adage: "Teach by teaching, not by correcting." You would note the challenge, and address it at a later time through an interesting activity that encourages memorization and solidifies the lagging skill.

And finally, your child might be making mistakes due to a lack of interest. If you remember that every behavior is a communication, then a child's lack of focus and attention to detail are sending the message that the activity is not contributing to their development. The good news is that our children are also constantly sending us messages about what DOES feed their development. These messages can come in the form of questions, passions, or self-imposed challenges. Our job is to notice them, value them, and use them as catalysts for development.

This week, I'm sharing an observation resource adapted from AMI trainer Molly O'Shaughnessy's 2010 refresher course on observation. I did a test run with it in my homeschool this week, and I have to admit that I'm in love. Here's how it works: During your homeschool week, you write down the activities your child is engaged in, and ask yourself: Was it chosen independently? Was it suggested by you (either directly as in "It's time for journaling" or indirectly, through an established expectation)? Or was it given as a presentation? Write each activity on the list only once with a tally in the corresponding box, and if your child goes back to it throughout the week, make an additional tally mark in the right box. You should record all purposeful activities, including those that your child wouldn't normally do at school. For example, last week my kids were very engaged with a large wooden marble run, and they worked with it productively several times, so that went on my list alongside math and biology.

In the box titled "Summary of Observed Interests", write down what you heard and saw as your child worked during the week. This is where you put their questions, comments, and spontaneous explorations. On the next page, you record the presentations or lessons you gave, and how they went. And in the last section, you jot down possible lessons for the following week based on the information from the prior three sections.

I kept this document inside my record-keeping planner, and when I finished using it at the end of the week I just filed it and printed another one for this coming week. It helped me focus on my children's interests, and allowed me to target new presentations to their questions and level of understanding. I hope you'll give it a try and let me know how it changes your practice.

And remember, you'll only accept your child's mistakes when you're willing to accept yours. Notice your self-talk, focus on your own growth, and give yourself grace. I'm here to hold space for your development so you can hold space for your child's. I look forward to your questions and wish you a beautiful week.

