

Honest Mistakes

Making mistakes as a parent is as certain as death and taxes. It happens to the best of us. We know our actions have consequences in our children's lives, and we want to be their shining heroes. But every one of us fails. We react in anger instead of patience. We're late picking them up from school. After a long day, we're simply too tired to deal with them and send them to bed sad and bookless.

Every parent makes mistakes. But parents differ widely in what they do with those mistakes. Some parents sweep them under the rug, never acknowledging their errors. Refusing to admit when they're in the wrong, they're more interested in image than honesty.

Other parents talk openly about their mistakes. They acknowledge the error, ask forgiveness of any wronged party, and do what's needed to set things right. Kids learn critical skills by watching how these parents handle their failures.

When parents are honest about their mistakes, children learn that everyone makes them. Mistakes happen! They're not the end of the world. There's often no blame to assign or recrimination to be made.

But following a mistake, life goes on. Second chances abound. As they watch us make reparations to fix what's broken, children come to understand that their own mistakes will not doom them to failure. Instead, they can learn creative problem solving by watching how we handle our own blunders.

Finally, kids whose parents are honest about their mistakes can learn to strategize for resilience. They come to appreciate the satisfaction that follows when we work our way out of a mess-up. Watching us fall apart, reconstruct, and repair gives them a pattern for working their way out of their own failures.

There is a custom in the Navajo tribe concerning weaving a small error into each rug. This error is made intentionally to demonstrate humility and to avoid offending God with the notion that we think we can ever be perfect. Acknowledging this error affirms the basic human condition. And yet, these rugs are beautiful artifacts to be treasured.

Parents' efforts to appear successful sometimes backfire. Children can't live up to impossibly high standards. That sort of expectation stands in the way of real relationships. Instead, recognizing their parents' human weakness gives kids a model they can relate to.

As we raise our children, we equip them for success by giving them tools for their tool belt. One valuable tool is a hammer. It has two ends: one for pounding, and the other for removing the errant nail. The way I figure it, they'll get more use out of the tools they acquire from our persistence than our perfection.