

Helping a Child Who Is Afraid of Making Mistakes

A child who is afraid of making mistakes may avoid starting, erase work repeatedly, ask for constant reassurance, or choose only tasks that feel safe. Help the child treat mistakes as information for the next attempt. The American Psychological Association recommends that families focus feedback on effort and strategies rather than fixed ability, and explicitly treat mistakes and setbacks as expected opportunities to learn and improve.¹ APA guidance on praise similarly recommends “process praise” for effort and specific work strategies rather than praise centered on intelligence; this approach is intended to support persistence and resilience when students face setbacks.² Keep the response concrete. When a mistake happens, ask, “What does this tell us?” and “What will you try next?” rather than immediately correcting the work for the child. For a child who freezes, make the next attempt smaller: solve one problem, write one sentence, try one new step, or practice in a low-stakes setting. HealthyChildren.org notes that unhealthy perfectionism can make fear of failure stronger than the satisfaction of success and can lead young people to avoid tasks; its guidance recommends focusing on the process, realistic expectations, and what can be changed next time.³ Parents can also model this approach by calmly naming their own ordinary mistakes and correcting them without self-criticism. Do not reward endless checking or perfect-looking work. Notice recovery: the child tried again, used a different strategy, asked for useful help, or completed the task despite uncertainty. The skill being built is not perfect performance. It is the ability to make an error, learn from it, and continue.

Did You Know?

- ✓ APA guidance for families recommends treating mistakes and setbacks as expected parts of learning and asking children what they can learn from them.¹
- ✓ APA recommends praising effort and specific strategies rather than intelligence when the goal is persistence and resilience after setbacks.²
- ✓ HealthyChildren.org notes that fear of failure associated with unhealthy perfectionism can lead young people to avoid tasks and recommends focusing on process and realistic expectations.³

Research Sources

1. American Psychological Association. “Top 10 Principles from Psychology for Families to Help Children Learn and Succeed in School.”
2. American Psychological Association. “Using Praise to Enhance Student Resilience and Learning Outcomes.”
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. “Perfectionism: How to Help Your Child Avoid the Pitfalls.”

Mistake-to-Learning Reset

Use this page after one ordinary school mistake to practice recovery instead of repeated checking, avoidance, or giving up.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Task or subject: _____ What happened: _____

1. Name the Mistake - About 2 Minutes

Describe the error briefly without turning it into a judgment about ability.

The mistake was: _____

2. Name the Reaction - About 2 Minutes

Identify what the child felt or wanted to do when the mistake was noticed.

I felt/wanted to: _____

3. Find the Information - About 2 Minutes

Ask what the error shows about the directions, strategy, knowledge, or next step.

It tells me: _____

4. Choose One New Strategy - About 3 Minutes

Select one specific change for the next attempt rather than trying to make everything perfect.

Next strategy: _____

5. Retry and Notice Recovery - About 1 Minute

Complete one new attempt and name the recovery behavior you want to repeat.

I recovered by: _____

What Parents Can Say: "A mistake gives us information. Let's use it to choose one next step and try again."