

# Growth Mindset Blog

## The Power of Mistakes: Creating a Risk-Tolerant Culture at Home and School



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Educators and parents want their kids to seek challenges and persist through difficulty—but so often, they don't. It's all too familiar: John always takes the easy way out; Angel gives up at the first sign of difficulty; Anna falls apart when she gets a disappointing grade.

Of course, struggling students are especially vulnerable to helplessness and fear of failure. But even high-performing kids fall prey to test anxiety, or avoid that one subject that fills them with dread. Why does this happen? And what can we do about it?

The sad truth is that many students feel very vulnerable in school. For lots of kids, school is above all a place where they are tested and judged—often publicly—and where they feel inadequate. Sometimes, this vulnerability extends to the home, especially if parents place a very high value on perfect performance or are intolerant of failure. It's not what we intend, but it's what they experience.

The good news is that it's within our power to change this, if we know the keys to creating a risk-tolerant home and classroom culture.

### **The power of mistakes**

Most students dread "making a mistake"—especially a public one. Here's what one beginning 6th grader told us when we asked how he felt about doing a hard problem where he would make mistakes:

"If I were doing it in front of people? I wouldn't really want to do it, because when you make mistakes people will be, like, 'No what are you doing, you're doing it wrong,' and that tends to be embarrassing. When you ask for help, and there's kids around, they know that you're not understanding it, and then some people think that it's really easy, they're like, 'How are you not understanding it?' and it makes you feel stupid, and then you get embarrassed." (Roberlio)

Note that Roberlio wasn't objecting to the difficult problem itself—it was the risk of embarrassment and "feeling stupid" that made him want to avoid a challenge. In our work, we've interviewed dozens of students and surveyed hundreds more, and most of them acknowledge similar concerns.

**Here are four things you can do to create a risk-tolerant culture, and liberate the young people (and adults) in your life to reach their potential.**

1) Highlight the value of mistakes in the service of learning. If you ask them, most people will say that they've learned more from their mistakes than from their successes. And it's impossible to tackle a challenge without making some mistakes. So, celebrate mistakes in your classroom and home as great chances to learn. Explain that learning requires stretching beyond your comfort zone. As a teacher, when you introduce a new topic or assignment, tell students they should expect to find some things confusing and to make initial errors—and if they don't, that you need to raise the challenge level so they will in fact be learning. Point out the interesting varied ways people approach the same problem, and have your students discuss what each person was thinking. Ask kids to share their "best" mistake of the week with you, and what they learned from it (and do the same yourself). And bring humor into the mix. A growth mindset teacher keeps a giant pink eraser labeled "For BIG mistakes" on her desk!

2) Put kids in charge of their own learning. When we are preoccupied with obtaining a favorable evaluation by others, we become risk-averse. Rather than focusing on your evaluations, encourage your kids to assess their own progress. There are many good self-assessment tools out there for students of all ages. Among them, those that ask students to reflect on their learning process—what we call metacognitive thinking and strategies—are particularly helpful for increasing ownership of the learning experience. Finally, ask open-ended questions that prompt kids to think for themselves: not "What did you get on your test?" but "How did you prepare?" "Where did you get confused?" or "What did you learn?"

3) Give growth mindset feedback. Praise the process, not the person. Don't get too excited about a "success," especially if it comes without effort. In the moment, it feels good to be told, "Fantastic, perfect, you're a genius!" But it focuses the young person's attention on the judgment that you have made about them, rather than on what they can control, such as their attention, effort, and strategy. Right now, it's a positive judgment—but if they don't do it perfectly the next time, it will be a letdown. (This is the source of a lot of anxiety among high-achieving kids.) Make challenge-seeking and diligent effort, rather than performance, the goal.

4) Nurture a risk-tolerant peer culture. We may not find Roberlio's 6th grade classmates very intimidating, but peers are powerful agents, and you can't have a risk-tolerant culture without their cooperation. This can work the other way too: kids can tear down a classmate who seems to be striving in class (the well-known "crabs in a bucket" phenomenon). As the adult, you need to set the tone and establish clear expectations about how your students treat each other. How?

Never call out or embarrass a student publicly over anything if you can help it. Don't over-praise students publicly—especially not for their attributes or for performance alone. Commend them instead for prosocial behavior—which can include accepting challenges, staying on task, persisting, and being resourceful, as well as volunteering, helping others, and being kind. Encourage and model empathy.

Ask students to reflect on how others may feel, and let them know that they can help create a culture that will support them by doing so for others. People tend to give back what they get! Finally, never compare your kids with regard to their attributes or talents. (This one may be very hard!) When one of the kids in a family or classroom is "the smart one" or "the athletic one," that child may limit themselves to that pursuit--while the others may just give up trying in that domain for fear of never measuring up.

Some of these changes may take time, and at first your kids may even resist, especially if they've become dependent on easy praise or learned to be comfortable in a low-challenge mode. But if you stick with it, you'll see them start to show more initiative, persistence, and supportiveness of one another—the hallmarks of a growth mindset culture.

Tell us about your experiences in creating a risk-tolerant culture in your home or school!

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