



What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers

Mistakes -- Opportunities for Learning



you won't know how to fix it!"

There was a story that Fred loved to tell about a carpenter asking a potential apprentice if he ever made a mistake. "No, sir!" he said, sure that would help him get the job. But the carpenter answered, "Then there's no way I'm going to hire you -- because when you make a mistake,

What a great lesson -- and not just for carpenters! We all learn by making mistakes. In fact, mistakes help us learn.

Fred felt so strongly about that message that on several occasions he intentionally kept a mistake on the program rather than to retape, like the time he zippered his sweater wrong and when he couldn't keep up with folksinger Ella Jenkins's hand motions. He wanted children to know that everybody makes mistakes -- even Mister Rogers. He also wanted children to hear what mistakes mean to highly-accomplished people, like the world-renown pianist André Watts. Listen to their conversation -- and enjoy some of André's music.



Here are some things to keep in mind as you're helping children develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes:

Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"If we grow up fearing mistakes, we may become afraid to try new things. Making mistakes is a natural part of being human and a natural part of the way to learn. It's an important lesson, at any time of life, but certainly the earlier the better. We all make mistakes as we grow, and not only is there nothing wrong with that, there's everything right about it."

Comment on the process, not the product.

Learning from mistakes takes persistence, and one of the best ways to encourage that is to comment on HOW children are doing something, not just WHAT they're making. Think about how helpful it is when you say things like, "I saw that you were upset when the blocks fell over, but you built them up again!" or "I noticed how you kept on trying." When you applaud their trying, they're more likely to keep trying the next time things go wrong.

Help children refuel so they can try again.

Haven't you found, too, that you aren't always ready to try again? Mistakes can be upsetting, making us feel frustrated and angry. That's true for children, too. You can help them refuel by providing comfort, letting them know you understand if they're upset, and encouraging them to stomp or pound play dough or use other healthy ways to express their frustration. After a bit of time, they may have the emotional energy to try again.

Let children see that adults make mistakes, too.

It's really helpful when you talk about your own mistakes openly, for example, when you've accidentally spilled water or forgotten that you promised a child a turn at the easel the next day. Let the children know that you learned to be more careful with the water or that you learned to write yourself a note so you don't forget what you promised.

I wonder if people think that showing children their imperfections makes them less powerful. Actually, I would argue that it makes you *more* powerful, because you are an important role model. The children are watching how you handle situations, and they're learning from you all the time. And, as Fred reminded us, our honest self is one of the best gifts we can give them.

Thank you for being our neighbor,



Hedda Sharapan
M.S. Child Development
PNC Grow Up Great Senior Fellow
hedda.sharapan@stvincent.edu

Learn More

[Subscribe](#)
[Archived Issues](#)
[Recent Issues](#)

Contact Us

Fred Rogers Center at Saint Vincent College
300 Fraser Purchase Road
(724) 805-2750 / rogers.center@stvincent.edu / www.fredrogerscenter.org



Copyright © 2015 Fred Rogers Center. All Rights Reserved. Fred Rogers photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection: Ohio University Libraries.

[Tell a Friend](#)