
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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DEVELOPING THE WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS AND MAKE MISTAKES

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Even experienced teachers make mistakes and handle things badly. The issue is not how to make teaching problem-free, but how to dignify and honor the problem-solving process that is inherent to good teaching.

~ Ruth Sidney Charney ~

INTRODUCTION

Being willing to take risks and make mistakes is one of the qualities of a lifelong learner. However, this positive disposition may be one of the most challenging to develop! Society tells us it is not okay to make mistakes. School and work experiences often focus on "perfection" or a good product—rather than rewarding hard work during the process and expecting mistakes along the way.

Let's look, for example, at the results of a traditional elementary school spelling test. Two second-graders get a list of ten spelling words on Monday. Jason looks at the list and thinks, "Yes! I already know these words." Joey looks at the list and not one word is familiar. All week, Jason relaxes while Joey works to master one new word each night. Jason breezes through the test, produces a perfect paper, and is rewarded with an "A", or a star, or great job! Joey proudly writes the four new words he learned, but 4 out of 10 is not a passing grade. Joey receives an "F", or ☹, or try harder.

In this scenario, perfection and lack of effort are rewarded. True learning which involves hard work and mistakes is punished. When this occurs, learning is seriously limited, because mistakes are essential to the learning experience. Is it any wonder many adults feel a desire to be "perfect" and avoid the risk of trying something that might result in making mistakes during the learning process?!

SELF-REFLECTION

The following questions can help you effectively engage in self-reflection about your development of this core disposition. Your answers will drive what you do next.

~ Do you still conduct training sessions almost exactly the way you did when you started years ago?

~ Are you afraid to "experiment," especially in front of a colleague or supervisor?

~ Does what you know and believe about adult learning match what really happens in your training sessions?

~ Do you honor and encourage participants in your training to take risks and learn from their mistakes?

If training is to be effective, both trainer and learner must be aware of the relationship between this disposition and learning. Reflecting on feelings about risk-taking and making mistakes during training sessions helps participants understand themselves better and learn to view their mistakes as opportunities for growth.

Mistakes are simply not possible, for every seeming blunder is just another step along the scenic and circuitous path you're following to wherever it is you're going. The sum of my failures is my present happiness. ~ Bachelor Brothers' Bed & Breakfast Pillow Book by Bill Richardson, St. Martin's Press, 1999

WHAT TO DO FOR YOURSELF

The good news is that you can begin today to develop this disposition. Start by a) identifying your fears, b) requesting support, c) trying something new, and d) recognizing your growth.

~ Identify fear(s)

Just identifying that you are afraid of making mistakes is an important first step to overcoming your fears. There are a variety of strategies to help you move out of your comfort zone with minimal fear. Some people think "what's the worst thing that could happen?" Others use the "ten-year rule" and ask: "how important will this seem in ten years?"

Be willing to try new strategies and activities. Your fears may seem small compared to the benefits for children and their teachers. And think what this disposition could do for your own growth and learning!

Without this disposition, teachers and trainers tend to stay with their own way of doing things. They tend to resist using what has been learned in professional development courses and educational workshops.

With this disposition, you will view mistakes as essential and will seek to discover what you can learn from each one. This discovery will take the place of berating yourself for not being "perfect."

If you have made a mistake . . . there is always another chance for you You may have a fresh start at any moment you choose, for this thing called 'failure' is not the falling down, but the staying down. ~ Mary Pickford

~ Request support

Have a frank discussion with your supervisor or the participants in your training session. Request support as you implement one new idea. Identify your need for constructive feedback even when your first efforts are imperfect. In fact, expect first efforts to be imperfect! Make a plan for trying again using what you learn the first time.

In *The Journey to Become a White Ally* by Margie Carter (Child Care Information Exchange 7/01), Margie Carter confesses, "I will periodically make a

mess of things, despite wanting and trying to do the right thing. I don't say this with a casual wave of my hand or offer it as an excuse for the inevitable. It is always painful for everyone involved and begs the question: Why does this still happen? I pull myself away from the path of denial and defensiveness, the trap of guilt and shame. Those responses will keep me from learning and from genuine connections with others. What patterns or habits are still at work in me contributing to this situation? What can I learn from my mistakes? Who can I turn to for help in uncovering my assumptions and analyzing my actions? How can I repair any damage, take responsibility for learning more, and not have this pattern continue?" (Found on page 71.)

~ Try something new

Sometimes, learning a brand new skill as an adult (like watercolor painting or rope-climbing) can help you "unlearn" old ideas about perfection and celebrate mistakes as part of learning. The next time something goes wrong in a training session, acknowledge your mistake and see what happens.

When trainers are willing to take a risk, the unexpected may occur. One trainer made the effort to use Power Point for the first time. She learned how to create the presentation and got help setting up the computer and the LCD projector properly. Near the middle of the presentation in front of 40 people, something went wrong. The trainer explained that this was her first time using Power Point, and she would just have to move on without it. While looking around her, a woman near the front interjected, "we don't mind waiting while you figure it out," and many heads nodded agreement. That was enough to encourage the trainer to take a moment, fix the problem, and finish successfully.

If we want to be fully alive and connected—discover our fullest potential as human beings—then we cannot fear making mistakes. It isn't until we fail that we really learn something. This means that when we make a mistake, we should raise our hands, our eyebrows, and our voices and shout "how fascinating!" ~ Benjamin Zander

~ Recognize growth

In the development of any skill, it is important to recognize the accomplishment of each tiny step in the right direction. The willingness to take risks and make mistakes is a skill that can be developed. It may be hard work for some but the outcomes are worth the effort. Let's face it, we are going to make mistakes anyway! Learning from them in spite of being afraid turns a mistake into a discovery. If you look back on your training sessions and see that they are better now than they used to be, recognize that you have grown regardless of any high expectations you have for doing even more. And when you turn a potentially embarrassing mistake into an educational experience, you deserve a pat on the back for your efforts.

A life spent in making mistakes is not only more honorable but more useful than a life spent in doing nothing. ~ George Bernard Shaw

WHAT TO DO IN TRAINING

You help teachers and caregivers develop this disposition when you foster its development in your training sessions. This is done both by your actively modeling the disposition and by promoting it—embedding it in the learning activities planned for the session. One experienced trainer explained that she builds “planned mistakes” into her training sessions so she can model this disposition. This seems rudely unnecessary! Most trainers make enough mistakes during a two-hour session to simply take advantage of these natural occurrences as “teaching moments.”

You model this disposition when you:

~ take advantage of mistakes that naturally occur during the session to demonstrate their impact on your growth and learning. When the chart paper you put on the wall keeps falling down, you might say, “Today I’m learning that two-year-old masking tape is not very sticky!”

~ express understanding about taking risks whenever you present a learning activity or new skills that might involve risk-taking on the part of participants. Acknowledge that you are asking them to take a risk and reassure them that you have planned the activity to provide any support they might need along the way.

~ express your own feelings about taking a risk, when appropriate. Explain that you are willing to try a new activity in the session because you know it will make participation more meaningful.

~ acknowledge that initial efforts may feel uncomfortable. Relate how uncertain you felt when you conducted your first circle time or facilitated your first training session.

~ pose new strategies and activities that benefit teachers and children and foster your own growth and learning. Use research to support a position that benefits children/teachers, and discuss “what it would take” to make it possible for this idea to be implemented.

More often than not, when [I] resist a new idea, [I am] not so much opposed to the idea itself, as [I am] anxious about the social consequences of the change. . . . whether it will force [me] outside [my] comfort zone to work in an area where [I] lack expertise. ~ Lorraine Schrag, Elyssa, and Tedi Siminowsky

You promote this disposition when you:

~ suggest that a new skill and strategy be tried as an “experiment” just to see what might happen.

~ ask participants what could be done to make implementing a new skill or strategy more comfortable.

~ encourage new strategies/activities and risk-taking by emphasizing the long-term benefits to children and their families as well as to participants’ own growth and learning.

~ help participants explore why they may be resisting trying something they have learned in favor of their own way of doing things. Both in individual reflection and group activities, you may wish to ask participants to consider the barriers to implementing practices related to the training topic. Again, this type of activity should always lead to considering “what it would it take” to make it happen.

~ offer support/incentives for trying something new and/or different. You may be surprised by what teachers and other early childhood professionals consider meaningful incentives. They have identified

the following: positive child outcomes, personal satisfaction, professional recognition, stress reduction, enhanced income and benefits, ongoing professional development, a certificate or degree, self-efficacy (a personal sense of competence), program status, sense of ownership, and laws.

~ embed risk-taking in the learning activities in your session. In their landmark book, *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* (1994), Marge Carter and Deb Curtis write that their primary goal is to create a climate that fosters metacognition*, giving attention to what teachers are discovering about their learning process. They look to Piaget who describes the disequilibrium that occurs as a child attempts to integrate new concepts. They've seen this in adults as well. Understanding that risk-taking is central to most new learning, they observe carefully to support their adult learners through the discomfort and disequilibrium that usually comes when trying to integrate new ideas and experiences.

They build risk-taking into their training by involving teachers in playful activities and engaging them in things they might not ordinarily do. By continually expecting and requesting that teachers look to their own ideas and experiences, they reinforce the value and acceptance they place on them as individuals. Their confidence and trust in teachers models how they hope teachers will view themselves, as well as the children in their care. A feeling of confidence and acceptance enables teachers to take risks and make mistakes.

Carter and Curtis describe using role-play activities to promote risk-taking. They choose role-plays centered around topics and adult experiences that "engage people's passions" and "design them thoughtfully and explain them carefully." Six different early childhood role-plays are described on pages 77-79 of their book.

Carter and Curtis also use a strategy they call "think of a time." To implement this strategy, they "encourage teachers to draw on their own memory bank of positive experiences with risk-taking and mistakes. They simply ask: Think about a time you took a risk

with a positive result. How would you name that risk? What happened? What did you learn?" (Found on page 79.)

CONCLUSION

Developing the disposition to take risks and make mistakes is remarkably rewarding. True growth and learning emerge when you are willing to try something new, fail, reflect, and try again. Accepting the risks and mistakes inherent in real learning opens the door to the growth and change you desire in your training and in training participants' early childhood practice. ~

*Metacognition - J.H. Flavell (1976, p 232) first used the word "metacognition." He describes it in these words: "Metacognition refers to one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes or anything related to them, e.g., the learning-relevant properties of information or data. For example, I am engaging in metacognition if I notice that I am having more trouble learning A than B [or] if it strikes me that I should double check C before accepting it as fact."

RESOURCES*

* *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* by Marge Carter and Deb Curtis (Redleaf Press, 1994).

* *Habits of Goodness: Case Studies in the Social Curriculum* (1997) by Ruth Sidney Charney, Northeast Foundation for Children. Six thought-provoking case studies of classrooms that range from kindergarten through 6th grade.

* *Helping Employees Cope with Change* (1985) by L. Schrag, E. Nelson, and T. Siminowsky. Available at www.childcareexchange.com for \$3.00. Category: Exchange Articles on Demand; Item #: 5004503. Discusses director blind spots as a problem with making change happen.

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