

Focus on Next Time

When your children break a rule, whether on purpose or by mistake, do you dwell on the details of the fault ... and all the other times it has happened in the past? Or can you concentrate on telling them what they should do instead next time?

If you emphasize past mistakes, you could be missing out on a chance to teach your children how you expect them to behave. When you look to the future, you can turn mistakes into opportunities for learning. In fact, in her book *Wonderful Ways To Love a Child*, author Judy Ford calls mistakes “the cornerstone on which we build our successes.”

Anger keeps us stuck in the past

When children misbehave, we tend to feel impatient, disappointed, frustrated and/or discouraged; often, this mix of emotions explodes into anger. Anger gives us a lot of energy (we raise our voice, we feel like hitting out), but it generally clouds our judgement.

It's hard to keep a calm focus when you can't think logically. In that state, it's much easier to yell about what just went wrong, rather than discuss what could be improved in the future. It's easier to scream about the toys that are lying all over the floor (again!) than to figure out how to get them put away on a regular basis.

Discipline is teaching

Real discipline is oriented to the future. It involves teaching children to behave appropriately, according to their growing abilities and according to our expectations and our values. We are trying to give our children tools for successful living.

Remembering that goal can help us keep our anger in check so that we can express our frustration and shift our focus to the future. Use those empowering words: “*Next time*, how could you do better?” or “*Next time*, I expect ...!”

Finding a solution

Persistent misbehaviour often signals an underlying difficulty that has to be dealt with before the behaviour will disappear. By carefully examining what is going wrong, we can find clues to a solution to the problem.

For instance, when the toys are all over the floor, are our expectations realistic given the age of the child? A two year old can be expected to put a few toys back on a shelf with help, but we can't expect perfection. Is there a place to put things away that is easy for the child to reach? If not, maybe low shelves are called for. Is the tidy-up job too intimidating? Sometimes, a young child is overwhelmed by the complexity of the task and really doesn't know where or how to start. This is the perfect opportunity to teach the skill of breaking a big project up into manageable pieces: begin in one corner and work to the middle, or begin by putting all the blocks into a box.

Skills for life

Don't expect instant results. Skills like these take a long time to master, but will serve children all their lives. Knowing how to get going on a job that looks enormous will always be a valuable ability — whether it's applied to picking up toys, doing math homework, researching a school assignment, or taking on a new project at work.

Fighting between siblings is another situation to which parents often react with anger, and which can be used to teach useful life skills. Since it is unrealistic to expect perfect harmony between brothers and sisters, parents can use the opportunity to teach communication, negotiation and conflict resolution. Children can practice skills in the family that will help them deal with conflict in other situations.

When parents make mistakes

Parents can apply the same approach to their own errors. When we do something or say something to our children that we wish we hadn't, instead of thinking we're bad parents, we can make a plan for how we'll react better ... next time.

by Betsy Mann