



*Teaching people to do the right thing.....
even when no one is looking.*

From “Mis-takes” to Compassion

Contributed by Jody McVittie, MD

I owe a lot to Bob Bradbury. He taught the parenting class that my daughter’s school counselor recommended. Did I *want* to go to parenting class? No. Was I desperate? Well – kind of.

The very first night of parenting class Bob gave us some homework – in three parts. Part 1: We were to go buy a small pitcher so that our children (then 6, 4 and 2) could serve their own milk at the dinner table. Whew, that was easy. Part 2? A little harder: demonstrate how to pour the milk, but pour it *next* to the glass instead of in the class asking, “Did I make a mistake or *am I a mistake?*” My kids laughed and said, “You are a *mistake.*” It was in fun – so we could all laugh and I thought that they were beginning to get the difference. Part 3? As the parents our job was to *announce* all of our mistakes for a week and follow them with, “I made a mistake, but I’m okay.” This was not easy. It took about three weeks of practice before I could even put the sentence together. I did not find it funny. It stirred up all sorts of uncomfortable emotions from my own childhood. It was also the beginning of my ability to be compassionate to myself – and for that I’m grateful.

It turns out that the distinction between “I made a mistake” and “I am a mistake” is a big deal. When we make a mistake, we may feel bad, but we can learn from what we did. When we come to the erroneous conclusion that we are a mistake, that there is something wrong with us as a person or that we are defective, that becomes the main “learning.” We don’t just “feel” bad, we begin to believe we “are bad.” Instead of feeling regret or a bit of guilt, we feel shame. That icky sticky feeling that I experienced beginning to announce my mistakes was shame. And, as I have come to learn, shame is hurtful both to the parent experiencing it and his or her children.

There is hope. Brené Brown, a social researcher from Texas, studies the shame and shame resilience. (You can listen to her TEDx talks online.) Shame is preventable. The antidote is empathy and compassion. When we make mistakes, we don’t want or need to see the solution or to have it fixed right away. The first thing that is helpful is to know that we are not alone. You can try it out for yourself or with your children:

Know the difference between, “I made a mistake” and “I am a mistake.” For some of us this takes a lot of practice and gentle reminders from those we love. You can help your children by helping them know that they make mistakes – but they are not a mistake.

Validate feelings: When your daughter is sad that her best friend is spending more time with another girl connect with her feelings without trying to fix the problem. “That is really disappointing. I’d feel bad too.”

Calm yourself: Sometimes when our children are hurting we hurt with them. We want them to feel better so we can feel better. It is more helpful if we can just listen (while maintaining our sense of self.)

Find a listener: Sometimes we are the ones who struggle to untangle ourselves from shame. Find someone (a friend or partner) who will listen to you and help you to know that anyone in your situation would feel bad too. Be a listener for your children.

Sympathy is not helpful. There is a big difference between sympathy and empathy. You can try it out. Imagine one of your more recent mistakes. If your friend is able to say, “Wow, I get it. That is awful,” you feel like someone is on your side. It helps you out. If your friend says, “I’m sorry you feel that way,” it is easy to feel worse and more separated.

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