

Create More Mistakes | Creating A Responsible Sports ‘Mistakes Made Here’ Environment

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Did you know that kids learn faster from mistakes than from repetitive “correct” practice? Sure, conventional wisdom, especially in sports, is that kids learn best when they practice over and over the “right” way to do something. But back in 2009, researchers Nate Kornell, Matthew Hays and Robert Bjork at U.C.L.A. published a study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition* that found that kids actually learn material faster when they make a mistake first!

It’s a finding similar to that of PCA National Advisory Board member, Carol Dweck, who notes in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, that athletes who have a “growth” mindset -- and therefore love a challenge and learn by making mistakes -- are more successful than those athletes with a “fixed” mindset who rely on innate talents and fear failure.

So this month, we ask: **Are you creating opportunities for mistakes?**

Create an environment for mistakes? Seems a bit counterintuitive doesn't it? But when Responsible Sports Parents and Responsible Coaches actively foster an environment where youth athletes can make mistakes and learn from them, performance soars for both individual athletes and teams.

How do you create a space for mistakes?

1. Tell your athletes you want them to make mistakes. Yep. You heard right. Let them know that if they are not making mistakes, they aren't learning. Let them know that you are happy when they make a mistake and proud of them for challenging themselves to get better and risking making a mistake.

2. Give them space. Mistakes happen when coaches and parents give athletes the space to make mistakes. When you let them test their limits, try new things, and experiment. Avoid having practices and games so structured that there is no room for them to experiment and try. Some of the best coaches – like Tom Landry – understood that mistakes by star players like Tony Dorsett, even on the biggest of stages, helped those players learn and grow.

3. Analyze mistakes. Don't just let mistakes happen and assume your athletes learned from them. Sit down and talk with players about their mistakes. Have them analyze what went right, what maybe didn't go as planned, and talk them through a strategy for doing it differently next time. But don't overanalyze here. Kids know when they have made a mistake. They don't need criticism – they need “positive reinforcement” and a game plan.

4. Practice a mistake ritual. PCA Founder Jim Thompson loves the “flushing it” mistake ritual. Players, coaches and parents alike make the motion of flushing a toilet when mistakes are made, reminding players to just “flush it.” The team at Responsible Sports loves the “brush it off” mistake ritual – like flicking dirt off your shoulder, you just brush off the mistake and move forward. It might seem silly at first, but that little hand motion helps re-center the mind and focus on what's ahead instead of the mistake that just happened.

5. Watch your reaction. How you handle yourself as a coach or a parent when players make a mistake is a critical part of creating an environment where kids can make mistakes. Do you unknowingly stare at the ground when a player strikes out? Do you become quieter on the sidelines when things aren't going well? Adults need to model behavior that is positive in reaction to both success and failure in order to give kids the courage to fail.

6. Reward failure. Some top companies do this: a best mistake competition. An award for making a mistake where the best lessons were learned. Let players nominate themselves (don't have anyone else – including you – point out the mistake). Then let them explain what happened and what they learned. If you're committed to promoting both successes and learning from mistakes, then reward both equally.

The ability to both bounce back and learn from our mistakes is one of the greatest gifts that sports can teach. But as Responsible Coaches and Responsible Sports Parents, we should resist the urge to shield players from failure. Instead, by creating and encouraging an environment where making mistakes is a good thing, our kids will learn the true life lessons that sports offers.