

Mental Toughness

Make a Mistake!

I'd like to share a personal story with you about my 7-year-old son, Shea, and how the experience of making a mistake almost ruined a summer afternoon:

We were in the backyard, playing a game of catch. He was getting used to using a baseball glove and doing pretty well with short throws when I aimed at his glove. As his confidence grew I made the throws a bit more difficult ... a little high ... a little outside. He dropped or missed many. And his smile went away. So did his effort. And so did his fun. Clearly, he didn't like failure (but who does?). Like a good sport psychologist, I reminded him, "That's OK, just keep trying." My encouragement had no impact. It was like he didn't even hear me. A joyful game of catch had quickly become an exercise in frustration and all the fun was gone. He wanted to quit.

So I stopped the game and walked over to him. I knelt down so I could look him in the eye and said, "I want you to make a mistake." "What!?" he replied with a quizzical look. I said, "It is impossible for you to know how to do everything right, especially the first time. If you are going to learn, you have to make mistakes. If you aren't making mistakes, then you aren't pushing yourself to be better - and *that* upsets me. But if you are making mistakes it means you are trying something new and trying to get better. And that makes me very happy and proud of you. So I want you to make mistakes." He smiled, and the afternoon was saved.

Shea is only seven and already is a product of our culture where losing and making mistakes aren't tolerated. My "That's OK" encouragement conflicted with his experiences in school, in youth sport and on the playground where successful outcomes are so strongly rewarded. Medals typically aren't given for effort. Mistakes aren't tolerated or accepted. Often mistakes are punished by ridicule. Sometimes they are unknowingly discouraged with an adult's display of frustration, disappointment or even a disapproving look.

The key to success is a willingness to make a mistake in the process of personal improvement. Below I have some guidelines for each of you:

- Athletes: Strive for excellence and be hungry with the belief that you can always improve your skills. Be willing to make a mistake so that you can learn from it. Improve your game as a result of that mistake. Try to make a new mistake each day at practice (don't hog one and make the same mistake over and over!). Each mistake is a valuable opportunity to better understand and develop your physical and mental skills. Use it!

- Coaches: Create a practice environment where mistakes are accepted as a natural part of learning. If an athlete is giving full effort and attention, a mistake signals an opportunity for additional coaching. Research shows that this approach decreases performance anxiety and increases both athletic performance and enjoyment. Follow mistakes with a "positive sandwich" - a coaching instruction sandwiched between two positive statements:
 - Start with a compliment: "That was great hustle."
 - Give future-oriented instruction when needed: "Next time, use the inside of your foot when making a pass."
 - End with encouragement: "Keep working at it and your accuracy will be sharp!"
- Parents: Kids know when they make a mistake (they don't need to be reminded). Coaches are there to correct it (please let the coaches coach!). Your job is to support them unconditionally, regardless of wins and losses. Teach them the value of mistakes. Your role is very important as Olympic champions cite the encouragement and support of their parents as critical components in their development.

So go ahead, make a mistake ... you'll be better for it!

References: Gould, D., Dieffenbach, K., & Moffett, A. (2002). Psychological characteristics and their development in Olympic champions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 172-204.
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Dr. O'Connor is a Certified Sport Psychology Consultant, Association for Applied Sport Psychology & Member, US Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Registry.