

Mindfulness and Mistakes:

The Power Couple of the “Aha!” Moment

Mindfulness in preschool, mistakes in elementary, and recognizing learning moments in middle school all contribute to The Country School’s culture of emPATHy.



By Holly Novick,
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“Do you want to play?” A little boy in the Green Room is crying because he doesn’t want his mommy to leave. Another little friend sees his tears, stops her game, and walks over to ask the boy this simple question. This is an “Aha!” moment, proof that even these tiny friends are capable of empathy. One sees another’s distress, recognizes it, and does something to help.

At The Country School, emotional intelligence (EI) is an essential part of our curriculum, even in preschool, because we know that it lays the foundation for our students’ future success and wellness. Through EI, our young students are able to develop a stable sense of self, which naturally leads to self-confidence and self-esteem, in turn enabling children to self-regulate, become self-managing, and ultimately develop coping and problem-solving skills.

How do we do it? Three important components to our EI program are positive reinforcement, verbalizing, and modeling. When children share a hug or a toy, we reinforce this prosocial behavior with encouraging words: “You are a kind friend. How did you feel when you were kind?” Through these interactions, we can help children identify kindness in themselves and each other. Once they can see it, they need vocabulary for expressing their feelings, which is where verbalizing comes in. Engaging in free play provides opportunities for a variety of play scenarios, and we can use teachable moments to verbalize as needed when we are acting as facilitators.

If a conflict arises, a teacher may say, “It seems like you are feeling angry.” By helping children to identify their emotions and giving them the language to express it, they are better equipped to make good choices and seek help when they need it. The way we speak to children, and model behavior for them, has a tremendous impact on how they achieve the ability to empathize with, and for, one another. It is important to both validate and acknowledge children’s feelings, so that they know their voice is being heard. “I know it’s sad when you don’t get a turn on the slide. I feel sad sometimes too.” Or, “I feel happy when I paint. What makes you happy?” model appropriate ways for children to express themselves. When they see us respond appropriately to our emotions, it gives them a template for finding a helpful expression of their own feelings.

By helping students recognize their own and their classmates’ emotions, and then providing the tools they need to process and respond appropriately to those emotions, we are helping them prepare themselves for the academic expectations and social interaction of elementary school and beyond.



With a firm foundation built in preschool, our students are able to move confidently into their elementary years, well equipped to weather the ups and downs of their academic journey. Recently in fourth grade, our teachers made studying mistakes part of the curriculum. When asked to define mistakes, Aiden M. said, "What mistakes mean to me, is something that I didn't mean to do." Are mistakes a big deal? Aiden Z. doesn't think so: "I think mistakes are when you mess up, but it's no big deal." Do mistakes have value? Sophia says yes: "I think mistakes are when you mess up, but you learn from it."



The benefit of seeing your mistakes in a healthy perspective follows students throughout their school years and into adulthood.

As adults, we are often embarrassed by our mistakes. We pretend they didn't happen or try to cover them up. We associate words like "humiliation" and "dismay" with mistakes, assuming that there is something wrong with us as people if we are fallible. TCS kids, however, connect words like "didn't mean to," "no big deal", and "learn from" their mistakes. They are able to separate the mistake from the person, forgive themselves, and turn the mistake into their own "Aha!" moment of learning.

They have internalized the process of positive reinforcement, verbalizing, and modeling, and are able to first recognize their mistakes and how they feel about them. By sharing them with each other, they then validate each other's feelings and learn from their mistakes.

For example, Isla says that "I was in a play and I ate an apple on stage. I was about to sing and I took too big of a bite and had to sing with apple in my mouth." Able to smile about it now, Isla shared her experience with her group (and she learned not to take big bites the next time she is supposed to eat on stage!).

The benefit of seeing your mistakes in a healthy perspective follows students throughout their school years and into adulthood. Middle School history teacher Amber reminds us that learning takes place for teachers too, not just students. She says, "I have spent hours crafting a fun, engaging lessons to have it crumble at my feet for different variables: half my students were out sick with the flu, we had a fire drill, I got so caught up in the idea that I misplanned the logistics, etc. Teaching is a learning lesson."



For example, Amber remembers a particular lesson on the West African salt trade. She planned an interactive lesson that incorporated all learning components and had each student taking on a role as either a trader or a miner. It involved students being able to move around the room and silently barter with one another.

“From a student's point of view, the lesson was a success!” she says, “They were able to move around outside, play a historical figure, and trade with one another.” From Amber’s standpoint as an educator, however, she got so caught up in planning a fun, engaging lesson that she forgot to spell out all of the directives. It quickly turned to chaos, and the main ideas got lost in the commotion. In a hurry to organize the group and redirect them to the next task, she forgot about the necessary component of reflection. Without making connections to the content, they were playing a fun game of trading, but not learning a complete, cohesive lesson. “The mistakes made in this lesson helped me understand how to plan more effectively and, ultimately, made me a better teacher. Sometimes you have to fail in order to succeed in the next round.”

Mindfulness. Mistakes. Making connections. What we want students at the Country School to learn is that emotional intelligence is the part of learning that doesn’t come from books. By intentionally fostering mutual respect and caretaking, our little ones learn to pay attention to each other, and see themselves reflected in the struggles and triumphs of their friends.



By Elementary School, students have built a steady and supportive social base that will applaud their mistakes, because they see them as the learning opportunities they are. And in Middle School and beyond, students are well-practiced in the art of learning by doing, by messing up, and by trying again. Self-acceptance and mutual support help us all recognize that “failing” is just a step in “succeeding in the next round.” Now that’s an “Aha!” moment!

Mindfulness and Mistakes Resources:

Mindful Parenting in a Messy World: Living with Presence and Parenting with Purpose, Michelle Gale,
<https://tinyurl.com/yyjhcv7u>

“Preschool RULER: Promoting Emotional Intelligence In Early Childhood,” Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence,
<http://ei.yale.edu/preschoolruler/>

“5 Steps To Nurture Emotional Intelligence in Your Child,” Laura Markham, Aha! Parenting,
<https://tinyurl.com/yy8eb6yc>

“Leading With Emotional Intelligence,” Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development,
<https://tinyurl.com/yxb2zaby>

“Mistakes Are Wonderful Opportunities To Learn,” Positive Discipline,
<https://tinyurl.com/yyu5dmfv>

“It’s a Mistake Not to Use Mistakes as Part of the Learning Process,” Richard Curwin, Edutopia,
<https://tinyurl.com/yalwauww>

“Learning from Mistakes: Why We Need to Let Children Fail,” Bright Horizons,
<https://tinyurl.com/y4gabu68>