

ERRORS AND THEIR CORRECTIONS

by A. M. Joosten

“Our primary concern is not that the child learns to do something without mistakes. Our real concern is that the child does what he needs, with interest.”

The reaction of so many adults to the mistakes of children is to correct, immediately and directly, says Joosten. To truly aid the child in development, we must learn to control our response to the child’s mistakes and recognize that it is through these mistakes that the child’s difficulties are revealed. We always have the choice whether or not to correct a child in the moment of error. If we pay attention and observe the mistakes of children in order to discover the source of those mistakes, we can be guided in how best to remove those difficulties that impede the child’s development.

Our task as educators is to help the child to utilize fully his natural energies and actualize perfectly all his potentialities. We must give this help by offering him what he needs, when and as he needs it. This help enables the child to develop into an individual who no longer needs our help, who stands on his own feet, who is independent. Whatever we may do to help the child, we must never forget that our help should be such that it enables the child to help himself and thus to progress along the road to complete independence.

When we endeavor to help the child to achieve this aim, quite a number of problems will face us. One of them concerns our attitude towards mistakes committed by the child. Usually, we adults are obsessed by thoughts of the mistakes which the child makes or might

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make. We seem possessed by a very compelling obsession which is beyond our conscious control. We anxiously expect mistakes even before the child has made any. We become tense expecting mistakes to occur, and feel certain that they will occur. We labour under the strain of this obsession, day in and day out. It is not easy to live with a person suffering from an obsession. The unfortunate child has to live with adults who are never free from this obsession; he is defenseless against it. While he is forming his personality, this acutely obsessive tendency of the adults around him becomes an influence in his self-construction.

What a difference it would make if we would help the child to realize that we value his efforts more than their results. How much more logical too, as results are in direct proportion to the efforts made. We would successfully adopt this line if we would encourage effort instead of impeding it. We must learn and control our irrational, emotional approach to the child's mistakes by understanding the place of mistakes in the child's life.

This is a serious problem—particularly so, because we are not conscious of the obsession under which we labour. By virtue of a general law of psychological self-preservation, we try to rationalize our subconscious attitude. In subconscious defence we say to ourselves, “If I am not on the lookout for the child’s mistakes, I shall not notice them and thus not be able to correct them. Then his development will be marred and remain imperfect.” We assume an illusory responsibility and use this argument to soothe our conscience which deep down tells us that we are not perfection incarnate, nor the child wholly imperfect but for us. Under the compulsion of our obsession we concentrate not on the mistakes, but on the child who commits them, more often than not even before he has committed them. We attack the child without understanding the nature and the origin of his mistakes. This is one of the fundamental mistakes we make. The fact that we attack the child who makes mistakes without giving sufficient intelligent and sensitive consideration to these mistakes themselves and that we do not even follow a consistent point of view in evaluating them, makes it impossible for the child to see his own mistakes and correct them himself. He neither acquires correct criteria nor does he get a chance to apply them.

Due to the obsession that possesses us, we let ourselves be carried away by intense emotions at the very sight or suspicion of a child's mistake. The emotions we feel are often very disproportionate in their intensity and this emotional reaction itself indicates that something more than love for perfection moves us. It often seems as if mistakes of a child make us lose all control over ourselves. The child knows this instinctively, and he shows this when he deliberately makes mistakes in order to catch our attention. This happens especially when he is deprived of the care and affection due to him and fails to attract our attention in positive ways. The relationship between child and adult then worsens because we ourselves are as little conscious of our weakness as the child of the motives of his own behaviour. We then are enslaved by it and we, in turn, enslave the child.

The exaggerated and uncontrolled emotional attitude we assume towards the child's mistakes makes us over-suspicious, and this, in its turn, actually provokes mistakes. The more suspicious we are, the greater is the provocation to commit mistakes which otherwise might never have been committed at all. Our suspicious attitude and emotional outbursts make the child over-conscious and so nervous that one little mistake may become the trigger that sets off a whole chain-reaction of ever increasing mistakes.

In order to discover and rectify mistakes one may commit, one has to make an effort. To make an effort, one needs courage, self-confidence and faith in one's capacity and opportunity to rectify mistakes.

The adult's negative approach to mistakes in the child whom he corrects and punishes physically, verbally or psychologically, robs the child of his courage and self-confidence. The customary ways of punishing and correcting result in increasing discouragement. What a difference it would make if we would help the child to realize that we value his efforts more than their results. How much more logical too, as results are in direct proportion to the efforts made. We would successfully adopt this line if we would encourage effort instead of impeding it. We must learn and control our irrational, emotional approach to the child's mistakes by understanding the place of mistakes in the child's life. This would help us to give

greater attention to the mistakes and less to the person who makes them. Only then can we help the person who makes them. Only then can we help the person who commits them and even prevent many from being made.

In order to help a person to avoid repeating similar mistakes, we must give sympathetic consideration to that person, not merely criticize the mistakes he has committed. We must help him to see the mistakes himself. In order to be able to do this, we must first consider the mistakes made. What sort of a mistake is it? Does it reveal a lack of clarity, a lack of capacity or a lack of interest?

The child reveals his difficulties by the mistakes he makes. If we look at mistakes from this point of view, we will be better able to help the child, firstly to see his mistakes himself and secondly to gain the courage to make the greater effort needed to overcome them. First of all, we must rid ourselves of our sub-conscious obsession, which makes us tense with anxiety that we may overlook a mistake. This nervous anxiety makes it impossible for us to give the child the scientific and objective help he needs. We must build up a detached and objective attitude towards errors by dispossessing ourselves of this obsession.



Michelle Playoust

We must concentrate on what the child tries to achieve. We must cure ourselves of the “professional deformation” which makes us feel that it is our “job” to see and correct children’s mistakes, and that, if we do not, we may lose our “job”.

Education is not a “job”. Our attention should be directed to the *child* and his normal development rather than to his mistakes. Mistakes and development are not contradictory. One progresses by means of one’s mistakes. They can be means of development, not when somebody comes and corrects them, but when one is helped to see one’s imperfections and to overcome them oneself, gradually at one’s own pace. The function of the adult towards the child is that of *helping* the child to develop, not merely to *erase* mistakes. Simply to avoid mistakes, not to make mistakes, does not necessarily mean that one develops.

On the other hand, we do not mean either that correction is in itself an obstacle to development. We mean only that any correction is not necessarily a help to development. Some do, some may, some do not. One cannot do one’s duty as an educator by learning by heart never to correct or never to omit correcting nor even when and when not to correct. We must learn to use and develop our powers of discrimination. We must learn to rightly judge when correction can be a help and how and where to make it, so that it may be of help. This means, that we, adults, have a great deal to learn. We can only help the child in his development by developing our own understanding, insight, and self-control.

To change ourselves is difficult intellectually and emotionally. It is not easy to control our emotions once they are aroused, and urge us to action, nor to realize the limitations of our intelligence once it has formed an opinion. Intellectual clarity is one thing, to act wisely not always the same.

We must bear in mind that a mistake does not necessarily call for our immediate and direct action. That even if we should have to correct, our correction should preferably be neither immediate and direct nor authoritative and dictatorial. Our authority must always remain a means to an end, it must learn to serve and never forget that it is vicarious and not absolute. It is immoral for an individual

to decide arbitrarily what is right and what is wrong. We need an objective touchstone in order to decide this question. If we assume arbitrary authority, individually or socially, it fails us and the child. In our relationship with the child absolute authority resides in the laws of life in course of development, it is this authority we should uphold and represent. Only then can we use effectively the authority inherent in our greater maturity.

As a rule, we must be indirect and not authoritative in our correction. We must also bear in mind that the correction of a mistake can never be an end in itself. We have not done all when we have corrected a mistake. We must not only show what not to do, but what to do. We must show how to avoid mistakes by trying and finding out the reason of the mistake and thus help the child to build up the capacity and habit of avoiding mistakes at all levels. Any correction must serve development. This makes correction in time and manner ('When' and 'How') dependent on the needs of development. The needs of development should decide whether we should correct, and if we should, then when and how. This statement makes us realize that sometimes we must *not* correct and that we may not adopt any rough and ready ways of correcting. We must emancipate ourselves from the slavery of keeping our eyes glued to the child's mistakes. We must look both ahead and behind, towards what the child has to achieve and how he reached the point we see in front of us.

During the early period of the child's life in our environment, he is very far from what he has to become. We must have in view a reality not yet visible if we want to help the child make it visible in himself. We must not concentrate on the imperfections of the child who is so full of them as a result of the psychic deviates he has suffered. We would be serving no useful purpose by concentrating directly on correcting the individual mistakes the child makes at this stage. Such mistakes, being the outcome of thwarted growth, will vanish by themselves when the child is normalized. That is what is meant when we say that correction can never be an end in itself and that we must serve development. This orientation helps us to put mistakes in their proper place. We must attach ourselves to the needs of development which guide and determine a continuous movement being realized by the individual now outwardly, now inwardly. They are our loadstone, not the mistakes which

may appear now and then. If we attach ourselves predominantly to mistakes which are by their nature occasional we will only succeed in giving permanence to them instead of ensuring the permanence of development.

Normal development does not depend primarily on activity performed with or without mistakes. It depends primarily on whether an activity is performed with INTEREST. Interest is more likely to be present when the activity was chosen by the child himself and to be absent when it was imposed, even if indirectly or unconsciously. It is hard for a superficial observer to distinguish the presence or the absence of real interest just as it is difficult to distinguish between a spontaneous and constructive or developmental activity and a spontaneous activity which has no contribution to make to development and disperses the child's energy. We must learn to distinguish not only whether an activity is spontaneous or imposed, but also whether a spontaneous activity contributes to development or hampers development.

The apparently spontaneous activities which are negative and which hamper development are often not really spontaneous, but due to the compulsory effect of negative circumstances in the child's early or present life. If an activity is not spontaneous, we must find out whether it has been imposed consciously and directly or unconsciously and indirectly. Only constructive activities spontaneously chosen by the child himself arouse a maximum of interest and serve as optimal means of development. (Actually, they also denote development achieved.) We must seek to promote such activities by providing attractive motives for activities, by their correspondence with his innermost needs capable of arousing the child's interest, and by presenting them in such a manner and at such a time that they make their full contribution. The child's interest is of vital importance.

If we observe a child who is performing a spontaneous constructive activity with great interest, yet committing mistakes due to imperfect mastery, we should never interfere. Our primary concern is not that the child learns to do something without mistakes. Our real concern is that the child does what he needs, with interest.

Any intervention on our part, whether it is to correct, or for some other purpose, should be determined in relation to the child's development, that means largely in relation to the child's interest. So before deciding whether or not to correct mistakes the child may make, and when and how to correct them, we must examine the effect our intervention is likely to have on the child's interest in the activity he is performing. If it is likely to diminish it we do not correct, because interest is the life breath of development. Our first concern should be to see that the child conserve and increase his interest. This does not mean that we should let mistakes pass unnoticed. We must observe them, understand their nature, and with their help understand the child who makes them. Only thereafter can we start considering whether we should correct or not. If our conclusion is that we should, then we must examine when to correct, immediately or at a later moment. Then we should start examining how to correct. If we conclude that we should *not* correct, it may be because there is no need for us or anyone else to correct. It does not, however, mean that there will be no correction. It may be that the material itself will compel the child to see and correct his mistake. It may be that the child himself will eventually notice his mistake and rectify it. It may even be that other children will do the needful.

Promotion of real interest is our main concern. It is incompatible with blind imposition. The ease with which we can impose our will on the child increases our responsibility in this matter. Our duty is not to make the child obey us, but to help him in his development. The child must obey not a mere human being, but the laws of development. A command by any human being must be like a voice given to the laws of development. We can, at best, serve as a mouthpiece of those laws. We must beware of our faculty of self-deception, by virtue of which we may be tempted to attribute our personal likes and dislikes to those laws. Hence the need for super-individual objective and absolute criteria to judge whether the child is obeying the laws of development or being imposed upon by us. One of the most delicate of these criteria is the child's interest. We must observe this interest to conclude whether an activity is spontaneous or not, and constructive or not. We must ask ourselves whether we can do anything to enhance this interest. If we concluded that we can do so by correcting, only then may we draw the child's attention to his mistake.

We may take it that correction of an imperfection in achievement which is due to the lack of ability or mastery is never a help at the *beginning* of an activity. On the other hand, a mistake in the way an object is handled, thus preventing any future constructive activity with that object, must be delicately corrected then and there. That would be a help. Misuse of an object which can never lead to any constructive activity is another type of mistake, which we must correct immediately and firmly, but positively, and without anger. If we observe a child who is performing a spontaneous constructive activity with great interest, yet committing mistakes due to imperfect mastery, we should never interfere. Our primary concern is not that the child learns to do something without mistakes. Our real concern is that the child does what he needs, with interest. We must learn to respect the child who is absorbed in a constructive activity even when he makes a mistake, because correcting then would break his interest as it is impossible to pay interest in two directions. We must wait. Waiting is the practical way of showing respect to the child's interest. Our guiding principle should be not to interrupt constructive work that is being done with interest. Activities done with real interest are always those that help the child in his development just as activities, apparently spontaneous, which are not done with interest are usually those that do not help development.



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Our scrupulous respect towards spontaneous activities done with interest should not create the misunderstanding that we foster mistakes. On the one hand, we do not say we should *never* correct mistakes, but we only say that we should not correct them under all circumstances, but first consider the purpose of the activity and the level at which it is performed. On the other hand, there is no question of fostering mistakes if we do not correct where others cannot resist correcting. It does not mean that no correction takes place. It may not be immediately, but it will happen eventually and perhaps through agencies other than the adult.

This attitude of ours is due to the fact that we realize that the child's interest forms the vital centre and that the activity is its peripheric manifestation. The activity that is visible on the periphery may be done correctly or incorrectly, may be difficult or easy, individual or collective. None of these is as vital an importance to development as the central point: Interest. That is why our main concern is to ensure the continuation and the increase of the child's interest. Very often we do not correct, lest we should disturb this interest. We must realise that there is always time to correct as long as the child has interest. If done in a proper way at a proper time, our correction may even rekindle the child's waning interest in the activity. To be able to serve this purpose, our correction must be given at the right time, objectively—without emotions—throwing further clarity on the activity. Correction given in this manner is not felt as a correction, but as a help to acquire consciousness of a new fact. At no time should we let any external force come between the child and his interest. We must zealously protect the child in his interest. This protection is as often against ourselves as it will be against others.

If we correct indiscriminately, we see the child's interest never gathering strength. We see the child getting disinterested in that activity in particular and gradually in everything in general. Then we may conveniently throw the blame on that activity saying that we cannot expect a child to be interested in this or that activity or on the child saying that he is, by nature, not capable of showing sustained interest in any one activity for any length of time. Passing this judgement on the child's nature, and acting as though it were true, has disastrous consequences on the child's character. The

capacity of showing sustained interest is a characteristic power of a normally developing personality. Another evil consequence of these indiscriminate corrections is that the child stops altogether working on his own initiative. He feels that he cannot do anything. He is disheartened. He has lost all his confidence in himself. Every time he starts doing something with interest there he finds the interfering adult and so he gives up moving. The child habitually saying no to anything we may suggest, shows another consequent deformation. If the child, on account of our blind interference, builds a barrier on the periphery which prevents the vital centre of interest to reach the motives of activity in his environment, we can do nothing at all. Now the child is hidden from us and we from him.

Of all our faculties the intelligence is the most sensitive to indiscriminate correction. Our direct corrections cause panic in the child's mind and his intelligence folds up. The intelligence having closed its doors; the other faculties are left in chaos being deprived of its direction. We must remember this sensitivity. Any intelligent activity done by the child with interest is accompanied by a great inner energy and effort. We must respect that effort. If we correct indiscriminately, we paralyse his efforts. Once again this does not at all mean that we respect mistakes in themselves and do not want mistakes to be noticed or rectified. We only want correction to be achieved with greater success and without causing harm to what is most precious. We want to correct better, which often means "Not Now" and "Not We".

Far from being merely negative, even mistakes have a very positive value. We already mentioned that to become conscious of one's mistakes may be a means of enhancing one's interest in an activity. Instead of discouraging, they may encourage to make greater efforts. In order that they may do so, we must help the child to get interested in his own mistakes. We can do this only if we know how to wait. It is very important to choose the correct moment whenever we want to arouse interest which is a flame burning within. The child is interested in certain things at certain moments determined by the laws of development which orient his interests towards certain activities and certain aspects of the environment at certain specific moments. We must choose the moment to arouse his interest in his mistakes in obedience to these laws of development and not

according to a time-table laid down by us, nor guided by our own ambitions which have nothing to do with what the child needs. So, in order to help the child to get interested in his mistakes, we must wait for a moment when he is ready and prepared to show such an interest from within. This moment will never be at the beginning of an activity, but only after he has acquired confidence in himself, in his capacity to perform that activity. Only then can we approach him with any chances of success. If he becomes interested in his imperfections, he will naturally be interested in rectifying them.

Thus, mistakes become a challenge for further activity on a superior level only if we choose an opportune moment to arouse the child's interest in them. The interest felt by the child will become a weapon which will help him to gain victory over his imperfections. We must help him forge this weapon himself. In order to do this we must remember to make certain points very clear to him while presenting any material. First, we have to show 1) how to handle the material and then 2) what we do with it, and 3) what we examine in order to judge the perfection of our own activity, i.e., the control of error. Of course, the material we offer should correspond to the child's developmental needs so that it is capable of arousing his inner interest. Careful and accurate presentation gives the child the necessary clarity regarding the purpose of the material and how it is to be achieved, and the control of error will enable the child to judge his achievement himself and to rectify any possible imperfections. When we observe a child committing a mistake and not noticing it, we must examine the mistake without interfering in any way, and consider whether we would be justified in correcting it; if so, when and how to make the correction. By not correcting a mistake that should be corrected, we would be exposing the child to distractions which he is not yet strong enough to resist, disorienting him before he can find his bearings. It would amount to abandonment. It is understood that we do not interfere when there is an orderly activity. If there be disorder, owing to some inner or outer disturbance, we would be failing in our duty if we did not intervene, firmly, without hesitation and without any emotional display. We must not limit our intervention to putting a stop to something negative. We must set in motion something positive which will help the child to move in order. This duty is often overlooked. If we see a child misusing an object, we intervene and stop it immediately. So far so good—but

it is not enough. We must then show him how to handle it properly or encourage him to take something else he can handle and is ready to handle properly. Prohibiting what is bad and destructive is not enough. It can only serve as a preparation to start something which is good and constructive. It is certainly stupid to stop misuse in anger. Our anger creates greater disorder in the child. We must be kind, yet firm. We may tell him that it is handled in a particular way or not at all. We must show him how it is to be used or, if he is not ready for it, we may take it back and carefully choose something for which he is ready. In this manner we will be initiating an activity which will remove his inner disorder.

All this is part of our direct correction. This is not all. Later we must try and find out what might have caused the inner disorder in the child. We must inspect the environment which may have been instrumental in causing disorder in the child. Then we must inspect ourselves and examine whether we have committed any mistakes of commission or omission or whether any of our unconscious complexes or emotional instability have been instrumental in causing disorder in the child. The adult's emotional stability is a very important factor in helping the child's inner order. If it is lacking, the child who needs and looks for a firm support in the adult does not find it and becomes confused and even panic stricken. Last of all, we must consider the child himself, as an individual and also as a member of his family. Even this is still a part of our correction. Correction within the school hours is only the immediate remedy which may not always suffice to improve the situation. We must get in touch with the child's home and examine if there has been something there which has upset his inner order. In consideration of all this we can actually be thankful for the child's mistakes. They give us great help in trying to find out what the child needs and how it can be provided. They also enable us to acquire an inner refinement we would be lacking without their help. Any effort made on the lines indicated here leads to an enhancement of the child's and our own life and thus further strengthens the bond between us. We may almost say that through these efforts we may reflect within ourselves one of the greatest prerogatives of God who can work good out of evil.

