

# It's Okay to Make Mistakes

Learning to  
repair them is the  
important thing.



By Diane Cbelsom Gossen

In talking with and working alongside teachers, what I hear time and time again is "If the children would only behave, I could help them learn." Teachers say they need techniques that will curtail disruptions. Many admit that discipline is the most challenging part of their jobs. What makes it such a burden?

## Asking for trouble

In our culture, we've tended to view discipline as something one does to control another. With this philosophy, it's no wonder that discipline is referred to as a burden.

The ways we've disciplined students fall into five categories, based on the style and degree of control. You may realize that you've fit into different categories at different times in your career. I certainly have found this to be true of myself!

**Punisher.** This person uses anger, criticism, humiliation, or corporal punishment. The punisher says,

### Student

calls someone a name.

writes on the wall.

steals something.

hits someone in line.

- “Do it this way or else.”
- “You never get it right.”
- “You’re always the last one to finish.”

**Guilter.** The person in this position uses silence, makes remarks that instill guilt, or moralizes. The guilter says,

- “Why didn’t you do what you should have done?”
- “I’m disappointed in you.”
- “How many times have I told you?”

**Buddy.** This person uses friendship and humor to influence another person. The buddy says,

- “Do it for me!”
- “Remember what I did for you?”
- “I’ll let you off the hook this time because it wasn’t your fault.”

**Monitor.** This person uses stimulus-response discipline by administering rewards and consequences. The monitor says,

- “You have earned (or lost) ten minutes of free time.”
- “Do you want a sticker today?”
- “If you do that, you’ll have to pay the consequences.”

**Manager.** This person works *with*

the student to figure out how to repair the mistake. The manager says,

- “How are you going to make things right?”
- “What’s your plan to solve the problem?”
- “What kind of person do you want to be?”

The first four positions are ones where the teacher does something *to* the student and is taking the responsibility for the student’s behavior. The last position, the manager, is one where the teacher is doing something *with* the student—letting the student take responsibility for his or her own behavior. And as managers, we help students examine their actions and make internal evaluations of what they can do to repair their mistakes. This is restitution.

### How do you *do* restitution?

Restitution focuses on solving problems and strengthening the person, which leads to self-discipline. With this in mind, take a look at the chart below. It lists common classroom problems and some typical ways of dealing with them. Notice how the role of the teacher as a punisher and a monitor is to do something to the child, whereas the role of the teacher

as a manager of restitution has caused the child to solve the problem on his or her own.

### Getting started

You can see from these situations that restitution is self-discipline, *not* punishment. Restitution allows offenders to heal themselves by becoming who they want to be and to gain self-esteem through righting wrongs. How do you start using restitution? First, ask yourself if you believe the following about your students:

- They make mistakes. Mistakes are normal; to err is the human condition.
- They know when they have done wrong. Even a toddler understands when he or she has broken something or hurt someone.
- They put up walls and use a lot of energy rationalizing past wrongs to preserve their self-esteem when under attack. Guilt and criticism contribute to their defensive behavior.
- They can learn a better way if we can keep them on the side of success. If we can view them as capable, responsible, and willing to change even in the face of their mistakes, they have incentive to move forward. ➤

Punisher	Monitor	Manager
humiliates the student in front of the class.	writes the child’s name on the board or takes away a privilege.	helps the student decide to tell the other person something nice.
slaps the student’s hand.	has the child write 100 sentences.	helps the student decide to clean the wall during recess and start a scrapbook for doodling.
yells and humiliates the student in front of peers.	assigns detention.	helps the child decide to give the stolen object back and ask how to make amends.
sends the student to the principal for punishment.	gives the child time out or sends him or her to the end of the line.	works with the student to make a plan to do better—a plan that focuses on respect, kindness, and caring.

## DISCIPLINE ALTERNATIVES

### Teachers Talk Restitution

Student says	Teacher says
"I'm sorry."	"It's okay to make a mistake. That's how we learn."
"Just give me time out."	"Are you learning anything in time out? If not, why would I want to send you there?"
"I didn't do it."	"I'm not interested in fault—in who did what to whom. I'm interested in fixing relationships."
"I'm so dumb. I shouldn't have done it."	"You didn't do it for no reason. What did you need?"
"Yell at me. Kick me out. Fail me. I don't care."	"How will that make you stronger? If it doesn't make you stronger, it isn't restitution."
"Whatever...I'll do it for you."	"Don't do it for me. Decide whether it's worth doing for yourself."
"Don't call my parents!"	"You can call your parents and tell them that in our school it's okay to make a mistake and that you want their help in figuring out a solution."

- They are strengthened by the opportunity to make restitution. Because everyone makes mistakes, an important life skill is learning to repair them.
- They won't lie or hide their actions if they believe they are capable of making restitution and will be given an opportunity to do so.

If you believe these things, you can begin using restitution immediately.

### The time is now

Our old habits will be hard to break, but restitution is an idea whose time has come. If we continuously focus on strengthening rather than on fault, we will become proactive rather than reactive. Now is a good time to be less concerned with students' wrongdoings and more concerned with searching together for a way to make wrongs right. ✨

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