

Figuring It Out

Life is full of do-overs, or “mulligans,” as they are known in golf. In education, we sometimes hear about “retaking the test.” The growing process (and I’d like to think we are all still growing, whether we’re 8 or 88) involves learning from our errors to avoid committing similar gaffes again in the future. Columnist and speaker Jan Denise said, “I’m glad when I have a second chance. I know if it comes up again, I’ll recognize it sooner and deal with it more readily. This is growth.” Helping children adapt and properly react to different growth events in their lives is a core value in Barrington 220.

With thousands of students all figuring it out together by interacting daily for hours in a school environment, there are ample opportunities for growth. As adults, we work hard to ground our mental model of acceptable behavior in a consistent, rational framework. Some of the greatest learning experiences for children happen when they make mistakes and when we, as educators or parents, are there to respectfully counsel and correct them. The language we choose is crucial because, believe it or not, when a slip in judgment occurs, the ears of the child or young adult are often focused with laser intensity on the words of the authority figure.

IN WORKING WITH TEENAGERS, particularly when they do something that leads to disciplinary action, I never want to characterize their actions as dumb, stupid or evil. Instead, I refer to their conduct as “an unwise choice,” “not recognizing the implications” or “being unaware of the impact on others.” When a student’s actions are labeled as unintelligent, that stamp can stay with a child for a long time. Speaking to a teenager about impulsive behaviors can provide the opportunity to turn an unfortunate situation into a learning experience. The shift from making unwise choices to sensible decisions is much easier for a child

than the psychological leap from being dumb, stupid or evil to becoming smart, intelligent or good.

Getting a teenager to understand a mistake is sometimes difficult. When I grew up, we watched “Leave it to Beaver” and “The Andy Griffith Show,” where meaning was always found in the mischief of two little boys. The fatherly advice Andy imparted to Opie, and Ward gave to Theodore, is in stark contrast to what today’s youth hear when watching cable TV or YouTube. I once thought, rather than suspending a student from school for an inappropriate action, we might gain more by requiring him or her to watch hours of re-runs

from those two classic shows of the 1950s and ‘60s. Even in the 21st century, there is still a place for that homespun humor and simple wisdom when teaching children important life lessons.

Years ago, probably from watching the movie Boys Town about an orphanage for young men in Nebraska, I was struck by the words that its founder, Father Flanagan, preached. “There’s no such thing as a bad boy,” he said. While he may not have believed in the existence of a bad child, he surely understood after hearing thousands of confessions that people young and old do make unwise choices. The intentions of the child are of-



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ten hard to determine, if they can ever be truly known. Was an action done with full knowledge of the harm it might cause, or was it simply an innocent mistake? Whatever the motivation, once they discover the emotional costs and consequences of their indiscretion, I am confident most young people with otherwise upstanding reputations would instantly rewind the tape.

Not only do we take a sensitive approach when a child does make a mistake, we also carefully select the methods to support a child back onto the right path. The words of another legend from the last century echo in my mind. Vince Lombardi, the revered coach of the Green Bay Packers once said, "It's not whether you get knocked down; it's whether you get back up." In football, like life, we all get knocked down at some point; the key is how we get back up.

After a student who has made an unwise decision realizes how better judgment could have been used, our next goal is to assist the student with new opportunities for success. This typically involves helping the child quickly reconnect both academically and socially. If a suspension does occur, a re-entry conference with the child, parents and staff makes certain everyone is on the same page with a plan to prevent repeated lapses or mistakes. As author Carl Bard once said, "Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending."

For all the talk about high-stakes testing in education, the exams with the greatest end result are rarely about reading, writing and arithmetic. Instead, they are tests of character, resilience, attitude and behavior. Schools exude learning. Often that instruction is connected to things of more profound importance – lessons, and sometimes second chances, to help our students better navigate their journey into young adulthood. U

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