



Affirming the Value of Mistakes

You are a middle school math teacher reflecting on your lesson from the previous day. During that class, one of your students, Jasmine, was solving a math problem at the board and made a mistake. You praised her effort and pointed out that mistakes help everyone see different ways of thinking. Jasmine smiled slightly, but when you corrected her work, she quietly nodded and returned to her seat. On the way back, another student, Dev, remarked that she “never pays attention,” and a few students chuckled. Jasmine kept her head down when she reached her desk and did not participate for the rest of the lesson.

As you think back, you realize that while you’ve built positive relationships with your students, the class may still need support in understanding how to respond when peers make mistakes publicly. You wonder how often comments like Dev’s, even when unintentional, discourage others from speaking up or trying. You also notice that when you asked, “Are there any questions?” only a few students responded, leaving many struggling silently.

In your next lesson, you plan to address the entire class about the value of making mistakes and how they are an important part of the learning process. You want to set the tone that mistakes are not failures, but opportunities to think more deeply, ask questions, and grow as mathematicians. You also want to explicitly teach students how to affirm and support one another when mistakes happen, so that the classroom culture reflects both safety and encouragement.

Your objective: Normalize making mistakes as an important and valuable part of learning.

Strategies:

- Remind students that most people make mistakes when learning something new.
- Draw parallels to learning other subjects or skills, including sports, gaming, music, and other activities that students enjoy and feel positively about.

- Use messages from teachers and near-peers to help ease students' negative feelings about making mistakes.
- Be honest that mistakes carry different consequences in certain contexts, like homework or in the classroom; failing to acknowledge that mistakes on tests are higher stakes can undermine the credibility of the messaging.
- Examples should include a mix of concepts and applications so that students at different points in their math education can relate.