

Making  
Mistakes!  
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# From The Principal's Pen

Every child should learn to ride a bike. It is one of the rights of passage for a child to eventually take the training wheels off and ride without an anxious father running along behind. For my son, this happened when he was three years old. He had a bit of a stubborn streak, and we were camping in a remote campground in the national park. All the other boys camping with us that week had bikes without training wheels, and he felt a bit slighted having to tag along behind with his "Baby Bike." Since bikes designed for three-year-olds don't usually come with removable training wheels, we spent the better part of the first day walking through the campground looking for someone with the tools necessary to remove them. He was insistent; he would not ride the bike with the training wheels. After an hour of looking for tools, we used the only tool that might work to remove the wheels. A hack saw. The move would be permanent, and we would not be able to put them back on after they were removed. So I sawed off the training wheels from a brand new bike we had purchased the week before for the camping trip. I had a bit of a lump in my throat because if this didn't work, it would be a very long week!

The wheels came off, and within the day, he was riding without me running along beside him. By the end of the week, he was doing laps around the campground. Yes, he went home with scabs on both knees and elbows, but he was riding his bike like the big boys. It is still one of the best family vacation memories we have. Those are great memories of sitting by the campfire watching as our three-year-old does laps around the campsite on a tiny bike without training wheels.

While I am not a psychologist, nearly thirty years of working with young people have taught me the importance of letting students make their own mistakes. Falling is an essential part of both our and their growth. Students who build a degree of resiliency are far better prepared for an uncertain future than those who have not had these experiences. Please don't think I am advocating letting students get hurt or injured, but I encourage you to let them figure it out for themselves. If I'm honest, I was the parent that wanted to run along behind my son for much longer than necessary. It was his mother that finally looked at me and said, "He has to learn to fall." These small falls are essential to what they become.

As we continue this experiment in remote learning, teachers are noticing that it is difficult for parents not to help students with assignments. The student that is struggling to comprehend a reading passage suddenly answers every question correctly. The student that doesn't know their multiplication tables is suddenly doing multiplication with larger numbers. The struggling writer is now writing like a published author. I know the temptation to help make sure an assignment is perfect is tempting, but it may not help our children as much as you might think.

One of the core questions our teachers ask each day is, “Are our students learning the material that we are covering today?” This may be the most challenging question that we ask during every remote lesson. Teachers use the answer to this question to decide the direction they go for individual students during a lesson. They must have useful data, and this data comes from the assignments students are doing at home. When you help your child with this work, it gives the teacher an inaccurate picture of the student’s ability and makes it difficult for us to customize the instructional level that they receive. These mistakes can lead to both growth and academic success.

In last week’s edition of the Principal’s Pen, I made a grammar mistake. Some of you may have caught it. I was horrified and angry with myself when I noticed it. I changed the published copies that I could, but I realize there are still a few copies floating around with the mistake. After I got over my initial anger with myself about the oversight, I realized it was the product of a late revision and an author that was in a hurry! The mistake helped remind me that as adults, one of the ways we naturally handle our mistakes is to reflect on our actions so we can prevent the same error from occurring in the future. This is precisely what we want to teach our children to do, and we rob them of the ability to figure it out if we fix it for them. When my son fell off his bike, he had only one choice if he wanted to learn. He had to get over the fall, get back on the bike and start peddling!