



SERIES 1 · CONNECTION, SAFETY, AND BELONGING

Learning Through Practice

How observation, instruction, supported practice, feedback, rest, and adjustment can make learning safer, more dignified, and more accessible.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 1 - Connection, Safety, and Belonging | 20-22 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Resources for Caregivers publications provide general educational and informational material informed by research, professional literature, and caregiving practice. Every child, caregiver, family, and situation is different. The ideas are intended to support awareness, reflection, learning, and informed decision-making; they are not a substitute for individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, educational, therapeutic, legal, financial, or other professional advice.

Individual needs, circumstances, and responses vary. Examples, strategies, scripts, activities, and suggested approaches describe possibilities rather than predictions. Resources for Caregivers does not promise or guarantee any particular behavioral, developmental, emotional, educational, health, safety, relationship, caregiving, or other outcome.

Caregivers decide whether and how to use these ideas based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in their care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when individualized evaluation, advice, or support is needed.

AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 20-22 minutes

Central idea: Learning grows through observation, instruction, supported practice, feedback, rest, reflection, and adjustment. Mistakes can provide useful information, but they are not automatically good, necessary, or evidence that learning has occurred. Adults help by protecting safety and dignity, understanding what kind of difficulty occurred, teaching what is missing, and making the next attempt more accessible.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Separate a person's identity from a particular action or result.
- 2 Distinguish accidents, knowledge errors, skill gaps, access barriers, risky choices, harm, and adult or system failures.
- 3 Decide when to allow practice, add support, correct directly, repair harm, or stop an unsafe activity.
- 4 Offer feedback that describes the task, its impact, and a usable next step.
- 5 Encourage growth without praising effort indiscriminately or demanding endless persistence.
- 6 Notice learning as a family without turning it into surveillance or performance.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

SAFETY AND DIGNITY COME BEFORE A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Never permit preventable injury, unsafe use of tools or substances, medical error, exploitation, bullying, abuse, or serious harm so that a child can “learn naturally.” Protect first. Food, shelter, healthcare, sleep, connection, communication, and other basic needs are not consequences to withdraw. A learning difference or disability is not a failure of effort; persistent difficulty may call for qualified assessment, explicit instruction, accommodations, or other support.

Learning Is a Process

Watch a person learn almost anything new.

A baby wobbles before walking steadily. A child experiments with sounds before speaking clearly. A reader pauses over an unfamiliar word. A cook changes a recipe after noticing that the texture is wrong. An adult misses a turn, asks for directions, and chooses a different route.

Learning rarely appears all at once. It develops through a changing combination of:

- watching and listening;
- direct explanation and modeling;
- guided and independent practice;
- success and error;
- timely feedback;
- rest, repetition, and memory;
- access to tools, time, and accommodations; and
- reflection and a new attempt.

The aim is not to celebrate every mistake. It is to create conditions in which people can receive information, remain safe and respected, and use what they learn.

Big Idea: Practice Can Turn Information into Skill

Practice is more than doing the same thing repeatedly. Useful practice has a purpose, an attainable level of challenge, and some way to tell whether the approach is working.

A child who repeatedly forms a letter in an inefficient way may strengthen that pattern. A child who guesses at words without appropriate reading instruction may become more frustrated without learning the missing skill. More effort does not automatically repair a poor strategy or an inaccessible task.

Effective practice may involve:

- 1 seeing or hearing a clear model;
- 2 trying a manageable part;
- 3 receiving specific information;
- 4 adjusting the strategy, support, environment, or goal; and
- 5 trying again - or choosing a different path.

Sometimes the most useful next step is another attempt. Sometimes it is a demonstration, a break, a smaller step, an accommodation, help from someone with expertise, or stopping for the day.

Mistakes Can Provide Information

A mistake may answer a question:

- Which part is already understood?
- What information is missing?
- Did the instructions make sense?
- Is the strategy effective?
- Does the person have enough time, energy, access, and support?
- Did the environment make success unnecessarily difficult?

But a mistake does not teach by itself. Learning is more likely when the person notices the mismatch, receives accurate and usable feedback, understands a better approach, and has a safe opportunity to apply it.

Error-free or nearly error-free teaching can also be valuable. Modeling, prompting, rehearsal, checklists, visual supports, and gradually reducing assistance may prevent unnecessary confusion - especially when a mistake would be dangerous, highly discouraging, or likely to become a repeated pattern.

The useful question is not “**Did the child fail enough to learn?**” It is:

“**What kind of information or support would help this person understand and participate?**”

Actions Are Not Identity

Children listen closely to the meanings adults attach to difficulty.

Compare:

- “The milk spilled” with “You’re so careless.”
- “Your backpack stayed by the door” with “You’re lazy.”
- “That word is difficult to decode” with “You’re bad at reading.”
- “You pushed, and it hurt someone” with “You’re a bad kid.”

Specific language keeps attention on what happened and what comes next. It makes room for teaching, responsibility, and repair without turning one action into a permanent identity.

This does not mean ignoring patterns. Repeated difficulty may reveal a missing skill, unclear expectation, stress, pain, an inaccessible environment, a learning difference, or another need worth assessing. A diagnosis can describe a pattern and open access to support; it should not become a moral label or a prediction of a person’s worth.

What Kind of Learning Moment Is This?

Different events call for different responses.

| What happened? | What it might mean | A useful adult response | |---|---|---| | **Accident** | The outcome was unintended: a cup tipped or paper tore. | Protect, clean up together, and adjust the setup without blame. | | **New skill** | Coordination or understanding is still developing. | Model, scaffold, practice a manageable step, and give feedback. | | **Knowledge error** | The person used incomplete or inaccurate information. | Correct clearly and respectfully, then check understanding. | | **Access or executive-function barrier** | The demand exceeds current attention, memory, language, sensory, motor, or organizational access. | Change the

environment, use supports, reduce load, or seek assessment. | | **Misinformation** | An unreliable source or another person supplied a false claim. | Verify together, explain source quality, and correct the record. | | **Risky choice** | The person understood at least part of the risk and acted anyway. | Stop danger, hold the boundary, understand context, and teach a safer plan. | | **Harmful action** | Someone's body, property, trust, rights, or belonging was affected. | Attend to the harmed person, stop recurrence, support accountability, and make appropriate repair. | | **Adult or system failure** | Instructions, supervision, access, policy, or conditions made the problem more likely. | Adults take responsibility and change the condition; do not transfer the failure to the child. |

These categories can overlap. A child may make a risky choice while overwhelmed by an inaccessible environment. An accident can still require cleanup or repair. A harmful action can involve a skill gap without erasing its impact.

A Common Response with Different Next Steps

When the situation is safe enough to pause, try this sequence:

Protect → Notice → Understand → Teach → Practice → Review → Repair or Change

It is not a script or compliance test. Use only the steps that fit.

Protect

Stop danger and attend to anyone who was harmed. Do not delay care while searching for a lesson.

Notice

Describe observable facts:

“The tower leaned after the wider block went on top.”

“Your homework is still on the table, and the bus arrives in five minutes.”

“You grabbed the marker while Maya was using it.”

Understand

Ask one or two genuine questions, or wonder privately if the person cannot answer:

- “What were you trying to do?”
- “Which part was confusing?”
- “Did you remember the plan?”
- “Was the noise, timing, language, or movement making this harder?”

Curiosity should not become an interrogation. “I don’t know,” silence, and an alternative communication method are valid information.

Teach and practice

Provide the missing model, fact, boundary, accommodation, or step. Practice only when the person has enough capacity and the attempt is safe.

Review

Ask what the result shows and whether the support helped. Adults should be ready to revise their own approach.

Repair or change

If someone was harmed, a successful do-over does not replace accountability. Attend to impact, replace or repair property where appropriate, restore safety, and change the plan to reduce recurrence.

What Adults Learn Too

Adults also misread situations, choose an ineffective strategy, speak too sharply, forget plans, or fail to provide enough support.

Modeling learning can sound like:

“I thought rushing would help, but I spoke harshly. That wasn't okay. I'm sorry. I will slow down and give one direction at a time.”

This is more than narrating an adult mistake. It names the impact, takes responsibility, offers repair, and identifies a change. The child is not asked to reassure the adult or accept the apology immediately.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Replace a character judgment with a description and a next step:

“This is what happened. What information or support would help now?”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Am I looking at an action, or assigning an identity?
- Is this an accident, missing knowledge, a skill gap, an access barrier, a choice, harm, or an adult failure?
- Does the person need practice, instruction, feedback, rest, accommodation, assessment, or protection?
- What must be repaired or changed before another attempt?

From Judgment to Useful Information

Exploration and Correction Can Coexist

Moving from evaluation to exploration does not mean pretending that every answer is equally accurate or every behavior is acceptable.

Children need clear information about safety, facts, consent, ethics, boundaries, and impact. They also need enough psychological room to ask questions, revise an idea, and admit uncertainty without humiliation.

Instead of using **“wrong”** as the entire response, add information:

- “That answer doesn't match the evidence. Let's find where the calculation changed.”
- “The pan is too hot to touch. Stop. I'll show you how to check safely.”
- “You wanted a turn, and grabbing hurt someone. We need a different way to ask.”
- “That source makes a strong claim. How could we verify it?”

The correction remains clear. Curiosity helps identify the next step.

Feedback Should Help the Next Attempt

Broad praise such as “You're so smart” can make ability sound like a fixed identity. Yet turning every interaction into carefully engineered praise can also make a child feel observed and managed.

Use feedback when it adds useful information. Depending on the moment, it can:

- describe what the person did: “You checked each piece against the picture”;
- identify the effect: “Leaving more space made the letters easier to read”;
- clarify the gap: “The first step is right; the units changed in the second”;
- invite self-assessment: “What looks strongest to you?”;
- offer a next step: “Try holding the paper steady while you cut”; or
- acknowledge emotion and choice: “You were frustrated and chose to take a break.”

Warm, genuine celebration still belongs in relationships. The point is not to ban “good job,” praise, or delight. It is to avoid making approval the only source of information or tying love and worth to performance.

Open the Relationship Toolbox

Learning tools can include more than encouraging words.

Clarify

- say or show the goal;
- demonstrate one step;
- give one direction at a time;
- check what the learner understood; or
- use examples and non-examples.

Make access easier

- use pictures, captions, signs, audio, a communication device, or adapted materials;
- reduce unnecessary writing, memory, sensory, language, or motor demands;
- offer more time;

- change the position, lighting, sound, or workspace; or
- request an appropriate accommodation.

Regulate and pace

- pause;
- move, rest, eat, drink, or use medication as prescribed;
- co-regulate or offer space;
- divide the task into smaller parts; or
- return another day.

Give information

- name what is already working;
- correct a fact directly;
- show where the result changed;
- compare the attempt with a clear model; or
- help the learner choose a different strategy.

Seek help

- ask a teacher, coach, clinician, specialist, translator, community member, or trusted peer;
- locate a more reliable source;
- use assistive technology; or
- pursue assessment when difficulty is persistent or significantly affects daily life.

Progress Is Not Endless Persistence

Persistence can be useful when a goal matters, the challenge is manageable, the strategy can improve, and adequate support is available. It is not always the wisest response.

A person may need to:

- stop an unsafe or harmful activity;
- abandon an ineffective strategy;
- rest before continuing;
- ask someone else to help;
- revise the goal;
- accept that a deadline or opportunity has passed;
- grieve an outcome that cannot be changed; or
- choose a different path.

“Try again” should not mean “keep suffering until you satisfy the adult.” A better invitation is:

“Would another attempt help, or do we need a different strategy, support, time, or goal?”

Turn Recurring Friction into Design Information

Imagine a child repeatedly forgets shoes on the way out. Calling the child careless does not reveal why it happens.

The family might explore:

- Can the child comfortably reach the shoe location?
- Is the departure routine too rushed?
- Would a picture cue by the door help?
- Are the shoes uncomfortable or difficult to fasten?
- Is the instruction competing with several other demands?
- Does the child need an adult prompt or shared checklist?

A lower hook, a basket by the door, more transition time, easier fasteners, or one consistent reminder may teach more than repeated consequences.

Changing the environment is not cheating. Humans routinely use calendars, labels, maps, alarms, calculators, ramps, spellcheck, and other tools to participate well.

Do-Overs, Consequences, and Repair

A do-over offers rehearsal:

“Let’s pause. Try asking for the marker while I help you wait.”

It can build a missing skill, but it does not erase impact. If someone was hurt, repair begins with their safety and needs - not with requiring them to accept an apology or resume contact.

Consequences should be related, safe, proportionate, and respectful. Cleaning a manageable spill together or pausing an unsafe tool until supervision is available may be related responses. Humiliation, fear, pain, deprivation of basic needs, public exposure, or consequences designed mainly to “make the child feel bad” are not learning supports.

Natural consequences are not automatically ethical. Adults should prevent consequences that are dangerous, developmentally inappropriate, discriminatory, or beyond the child's capacity to understand.

Growth Mindset in Context

A growth mindset is commonly described as the belief that abilities can develop. This idea can support experimentation when it is paired with effective teaching, strategy, feedback, time, access, and realistic goals.

It becomes harmful when simplified into:

- “Anyone can achieve anything if they try hard enough.”
- “If you are struggling, your mindset is the problem.”
- “Disability is a limit you should overcome through effort.”

- “Every goal is attainable.”
- “Stopping means you gave up.”

People differ in bodies, opportunities, resources, prior learning, discrimination, health, and the kinds of support available. Some abilities can develop substantially; some limits remain; outcomes are not fully under individual control.

Research on growth mindset and achievement is contested and heterogeneous. Meta-analyses have reached different conclusions about the size and reliability of effects, with average effects generally small and results depending on study quality, population, and implementation. Treat growth mindset as one possible belief framework - not a promise, diagnosis, or substitute for good instruction and equitable conditions.

When More Support May Be Needed

Consider qualified help when difficulty is persistent, worsening, unusually distressing, or significantly affects learning, communication, relationships, health, safety, or daily participation.

Possible supports include educational evaluation, hearing or vision assessment, medical care, occupational or speech-language services, mental-health care, disability accommodations, literacy or numeracy intervention, and practical family or community resources.

Do not wait for a child to fail repeatedly to “prove” that support is necessary. Early support can reduce frustration and provide more accurate information about what the learner needs.

What Adults Learn Too

When a strategy does not work, adults can ask whether the teaching, timing, expectation, or environment should change. The lesson is not always located inside the child.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Give feedback with three parts when all three are useful:

“Here is what I noticed. Here is why it matters. Here is one possible next step.”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Does my feedback provide information, or mainly approval and disapproval?
- Have I corrected important facts or boundaries clearly?
- Is repeated practice strengthening the right strategy?
- Would rest, access, explicit instruction, or a new goal be more useful than persistence?
- Does someone need repair rather than a cheerful do-over?

Notice Learning Without Making It a Performance

Family Activity: Collect Learning

For two weeks, notice naturally occurring learning moments. Participation is optional. Do not create mistakes, require a daily confession, compare family members, or turn the activity into a behavior chart.

When someone wants to share, ask any of these:

- What happened?
- What did you notice?
- What information did you get?
- What helped or made it harder?
- Would you try something next, ask for help, change the setup, or stop?
- Is there anything an adult needs to teach, repair, or change?

One answer can be enough. “I don’t know,” “I don’t want to share,” and private reflection are valid choices.

Families can keep a private bowl of notes, a shared page, drawings, voice recordings, or no record at all. Include learning that came from success, watching someone, asking a question, resting, changing a system, or realizing that a goal was not worth continuing - not only learning that followed mistakes.

Big Words, Clear Meanings

Growth mindset

A **growth mindset** is the belief that some abilities can develop through effective practice, instruction, strategy, feedback, support, and time.

It does not mean that everyone begins with the same resources, learns in the same way, or can reach every outcome through effort.

For a young child, try:

“You can learn and change with help, practice, and ways that work for you.”

Practice

Practice means making purposeful attempts while using information to strengthen or change a skill.

Practice may include watching, doing a small part with help, resting, using an accommodation, checking the result, or trying another strategy. Repetition without information or access is not always useful practice.

For a young child, try:

“Practice means trying a skill, noticing what happens, and choosing what could help next.”

Storybook Connection

In Ashley Spires's *The Most Magnificent Thing*, a girl has an idea and begins building with her dog nearby. Her creations do not match what she imagined. Frustration grows until she quits. A walk gives her distance and a new perspective; when she returns, she notices useful parts of earlier attempts and continues creating.

As you read, ask:

- What did the girl learn from making, looking, and taking a break?
- Did doing the same thing repeatedly help, or did her approach change?
- What did her dog contribute?
- How did distance change what she could notice?
- When can a break be part of learning?
- Would it also have been acceptable to stop, ask for help, or build something different?
- What tools or accommodations would make this kind of project accessible to different people?

The story offers one satisfying creative journey. It should not become proof that every project must be completed or every frustration pushed through.

What We Hope You Will Discover

Learning is already present in ordinary family life:

- a child asks for the directions in another form;
- an adult admits that an expectation was unclear;
- someone checks a source before repeating a claim;
- a learner rests and returns with more capacity;
- a family changes a recurring obstacle in the environment;
- a person notices that a strategy is not working;
- someone repairs harm and practices a safer action; or
- a goal changes when new information arrives.

These moments do not need a speech, sticker, or public celebration. Often the most supportive response is brief acknowledgment and the resources needed for what comes next.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

Learning Grows Through Supported Practice.

Safe relationships make it easier to be uncertain, ask for clarification, disclose difficulty, receive correction, and begin again. Effective teaching, meaningful feedback, access, rest, resources, and responsive systems also shape what becomes possible.

Caregivers do not need to remove every manageable frustration. They also do not need to withhold help, manufacture failure, or treat suffering as proof of growth. Their role is to protect, understand, teach, scaffold, listen, repair, and adjust.

Try This for Two Weeks

When a natural learning moment occurs, record one optional sentence:

“Today I learned...”

Broaden what counts:

- “...that I need written directions.”
- “...that the smaller pan heats faster.”
- “...that this strategy does not work for me.”
- “...that I need to apologize and replace what I broke.”
- “...that ten minutes of practice is enough today.”
- “...that our morning setup needs to change.”
- “...that I should ask someone with more experience.”

At the end of each week, anyone who wishes can share one discovery. Keep the practice private, noncompetitive, and separate from rewards or punishment.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Add one question to the family toolbox:

“What did this give us information about?”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Did we notice learning from instruction, success, observation, rest, and support as well as from error?
- Could anyone decline to share without pressure?
- Did the activity expose a need for access, teaching, repair, or outside help?
- Are we honoring different ways and rates of learning?
- What should an adult or system change next?

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Working Side by Side considers the balance between independent engagement and reliable connection. *The Big Step* explores supported learning during school transitions. *Growing Through Recovery* places persistence within a wider context of protection, access, relationships, and resources. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Learning is a process, not a verdict on identity. It can grow through observation, explicit instruction, supported practice, feedback, success, error, rest, reflection, and changed conditions.

Mistakes can provide information, but they are not automatically teachers. Protect before experimenting. Identify what kind of event occurred. Correct important facts and boundaries clearly. Separate a person's worth from an action while still addressing impact. Offer a usable next step. Repair harm. Change inaccessible environments. Seek assessment or expertise when repeated difficulty suggests that ordinary family tools are not enough.

Encourage persistence when it serves a meaningful, attainable, and adequately supported goal. Make room for breaks, accommodations, help, revised strategies, and different paths.

The message is not **“Every mistake is good”** or **“Effort guarantees success.”** It is:

“You remain worthy while you learn. We can use information, support, and practice to decide what comes next.”

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

- 1 Metcalfe, J. (2017). Learning from errors. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 68, 465-489. This review describes how errors followed by corrective feedback can support memory and learning; error alone is not the intervention.
- 2 Wisniewski, B., Zierer, K., & Hattie, J. (2020). The power of feedback revisited: A meta-analysis of educational feedback research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 3087. Across a large and varied evidence base, feedback effects depended on what information the feedback contained and where it directed attention.
- 3 Macnamara, B. N., & Burgoyne, A. P. (2023). Do growth mindset interventions impact students' academic achievement? A systematic review and meta-analysis with recommendations for best practices. *Psychological Bulletin*, 149(3-4), 133-173. This analysis found very small average effects and no significant effect among the highest-quality evidence, underscoring concerns about bias and study design.
- 4 Burnette, J. L., Billingsley, J., Banks, G. C., Knouse, L. E., Hoyt, C. L., Pollack, J. M., & Simon, S. (2023). A systematic review and meta-analysis of growth mindset interventions: For whom, how, and why might such interventions work?. *Psychological Bulletin*, 149(3-4), 174-205. This analysis reported small, heterogeneous effects and larger estimates in selected targeted or high-fidelity contexts. Read with the competing meta-analysis above rather than treating the evidence as settled.
- 5 Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House. An influential popular account of beliefs about ability. It is best used with later evidence on small, variable effects and without implying that effort can overcome every personal or structural limit.
- 6 Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2014). No-Drama Discipline: The Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind. Bantam. A practical relationship-centered parenting framework; it is not a substitute for individualized clinical, educational, disability, or safeguarding support.
- 7 Lahey, J. (2015). *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. Harper. A practical parenting argument for developmentally appropriate independence and consequences; its recommendations require safety, disability, culture, resources, and the individual child to be considered.
- 8 Spires, A. (2014). The Most Magnificent Thing. Kids Can Press. A picture book about the creative process, frustration, a restorative break, perspective, and revising earlier attempts.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

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