

Guideline #1

Autonomy-supportive parents' guide children toward solutions.

I know you know what five times three is, so what happens when you add another five? Why do you think the cold glass broke when you poured hot water into it? Try holding the protractor so you can read the numbers right-side up.

Parenting is teaching, and teachers look for the teachable moments in just about everything we do. Find those moments and lead your child toward answers. Discoveries children make under their own steam will always be remembered longer and understood more deeply than the answers you hand them out of impatience.

Guideline #2

Autonomy-supportive parents allow for mistakes and help children understand the consequences of those mistakes.

It's no big deal that you dropped that glass, I'll show you how to clean it all up, and you can remember to carry fewer next time. Pick out the lumps in the oatmeal, and I'll show you how to avoid that mistake for next time. The mop bucket spilled because it's too short to hold the weight of the mop handle; just clean up the mess and use the other bucket the next time.

It can be so hard to keep our sense of humor and patience when there's shattered glass or dirty water all over the kitchen floor, but if we show our kids that mistakes are part of the process of learning, they will be more positive about their abilities and better able to bounce back from mistakes in future attempts. If we teach them that messing up means the world will crumble around them, we only succeed in reinforcing fear of failure.

Guideline #3

Autonomy-supportive parents value the mistakes as much as the successes.

I am so proud of you for sticking with that worksheet even though it was hard for you. What could you have said to your brother that might have helped him understand you rather than throw his toy at you?

One way to teach our children that we value mistakes as an educational tool is to support and love them as much during the mistakes as we do during the successes. Find the lessons in the failures. Help them discover new ways to cope and rebound from their mistakes in order to do better next time. Empathize and love them when they have messed up, because that's when they need our support the most.

Guideline #4

Autonomy-supportive parents acknowledge children's feelings of frustration and disappointment.

I get mad, too, when I can't do something right the first time, but I keep trying until I figured it out. Remember yesterday, when I did not get that job I wanted? That was really disappointing, but I know I'll figure something else out if I work at it. I can image be how frustrating this math must be for you, but won't it feel great when you know how to do it?

Let your child know that you understand that algebra is hard sometimes, and it must have felt terrible when Kayla refused to sit with her at lunch, and that, yes, it can be really frustrating when the teacher marked up that paper she worked so hard on. We all need to feel heard and understood, and this is when connection happens. Show your child that you empathize with her feelings, and subsequent problem-solving will be much easier to hear.

Guideline #5

Autonomy-supportive parents give feedback.

Look down at your buttons: something looks off - can you figure out what's wrong? If you forgot to carry the two in that other problem, maybe you made the same mistake on this problem?

Effective feedback supports effort and guides the child toward seeing her mistakes. Kids value supportive observations that encourage them to solve their own problems more than specific directions because solutions are their own, not yours.