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Misbehaviour or mistake?

- **BEHAVIOUR**

by Michael Grose

Ella was a distressed mum. She'd discovered her eight-year-old daughter Ruby had stolen a bracelet from another girl at school. Shocked and angry, she approached her daughter to talk about the behaviour.

Ruby clammed up, refusing to talk so Ella wisely took a step back and sought advice from her family.

Ella sought advice from her own mother who suggested that she see her daughter's behaviour as a mistake, rather than a misbehaviour. Ella's mother was spot on.

It's easy to see children's poor behaviour through a moral lens, thinking that they are somehow inherently bad, or on the road to ruin if they behave poorly or infringe on someone else's rights. This view neglects the notion that children's behaviour is on a steep learning curve. They wear L-plates for a long time, which is just as well, as they are likely to mess up many times, particularly in the teenage years.

"You've made a mistake"

Calmly, with newfound confidence that having a plan provides, Ella approached her daughter again about the issue saying, "I know that's (stealing) not like you. Can you tell me what happened?"

Upset, the young girl told her mum how she'd seen the bracelet for some time and just couldn't resist taking it when the opportunity came.

Tears of remorse flowed freely. Ella asked, "What should we do now?"

"I'll give it back." "Good idea. I can help you if you like."

"Thank you."

Misbehaviour or mistake?

Viewing behaviour through the learning lens changed the way that Ella approached her daughter. If you take this approach when your children behave poorly, your language and the way you follow up the behaviour may need to change.

Punishment or making amends?

If you think that a child has misbehaved, then they generally need to be punished by experiencing something unpleasant such as grounding or a loss of privileges to teach them a lesson. However, if you believe kids make mistakes, they should make amends such as returning a stolen good or making up for poor behaviour in some way.

Correcting the past or learning for the future?

When the misbehaviour is the focus, your main concern will be about the past and to ensure that the misbehaviour isn't be repeated. When the focus is on a mistake, your main concern will be about the future and ensuring they improve the way they treat others.

Judge or coach?

When misbehaviour is the focus your role as a parent is part police, part judge ensuring rules are followed and punishment is administered fairly. When a mistake becomes the focus, your role becomes part teacher, part coach showing kids better ways of behaviour and keeping relationships intact.

In closing

How do you view your child's indiscretions? Do you see them as misbehaviours to get rid of or mistakes to be learned from? Perhaps you see them as a little of both. How you view your child's poor behaviour is a choice, and one that determines your approach and the effectiveness of your response.