

Giving the Gift of Wisdom

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July 1, 2024



Coach Myrna, July 1, 2024
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As a preschool and kindergarten teacher, I often read books about Anansi the spider to my students. In one of the beloved West African tales, Anansi, knowing that he was clever but not wise, decided to gather all the wisdom of the village and put it in a hollow gourd. Then, he was sure he would be the wisest of them all!

As he went door to door, everyone freely shared their wisdom with him because they knew that of all the creatures, it was Anansi that needed wisdom the most. Soon his gourd was overflowing with wisdom and he needed to find a place to hide it. Spotting a tall tree, he decided to climb to the top so that no one could steal it from him.

The climb was difficult and slow as he struggled to climb the tree with the gourd tied around his waist in front of him. Finally, one of his sons came by and suggested it be easier if he tied the gourd behind him. Anansi rotated the gourd and soon reached the top of the tree. As he looked out over the area, he realized that he had collected so much wisdom from everyone, but his young son was still wiser than him. In that moment, realizing that wisdom is meant to be freely shared, he lifted the gourd high over his head and spilled its contents into the wind. The wisdom blew far and wide and settled across the land. And this is the tale of how wisdom came to the world.

As in the Anansi tale, wisdom is learned through experience and often deepens through trial and error, resulting in making a multitude of mistakes. I remember clearly as a child the wisdom I gained concerning my parents' rule that you must wear shoes while riding a bike after getting my toes caught not once but twice in the bicycle spokes. I still feel pain in the pit of my stomach, remembering my bloody feet and the apprehension I felt as I wondered how I could hide them from my mom. She didn't need to lecture or reprimand me; the pain did the teaching.

In fact, if we focus too much on what our child does wrong, they may respond with defensiveness and we lose a teachable moment. By sharing the thinking with our child, we provide them the opportunity to grapple with the consequences of their choices. When our child misbehaves or makes a mistake, it is best to first express our most heartfelt empathy and then wonder aloud, "Do you think that there might be another way to do this?" or "How might you fix it?" Giving a child some guidance and allowing them to struggle to find a solution helps build responsibility and self-esteem. For the child, having the satisfaction of saying, "I figured it out!" or "I did it!" is part of their development of self-efficacy as discussed in the chapter on Resilience.

Thinking, reflecting, and learning from experiences are just like other skills—they need plenty of practice to develop wisdom. The key is asking lots of questions instead of telling our child what to do. Questions allow them to think and digest; issuing commands can cause resistance. We are acting with wisdom when we ask questions and guide our child towards a better solution.

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