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Kimochis® Teach Us It's Okay to Make Mistakes

For Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Children with autism spectrum disorder can become very frustrated when they make a mistake or when something they are working on does not come out perfectly. Sometimes children will not try new things unless they are sure they can do it perfectly. These children can set very high standards for themselves, which may be impossible to live up to. They can be very sensitive to criticism and become afraid of making errors. They can get overwhelmed with the scale and gradation of their mistakes. Because children with autism tend to have very black-or-white concrete thinking, each mistake or imperfection stands out, and seems massive and insurmountable. Children with this tendency need help learning that most mistakes are minor, correctable, and have very few lasting consequences. We can clean up the spilt milk, change our clothes, or redo a math problem. Typically developing children understand that they practice tasks at school, such as spelling, writing and math, to improve their skills and mistakes are part of the learning process.

The Kimochis® character Cat is a decisive leader who likes to have things just right and her way. Because Cat struggles with mistakes and imperfections, she can be a great teacher!

Introduce Cat to Your Child

Read Cat's story from the *Kimochis® Feel Guide*—included in the Cat character box. If your child can read, he/she might want to read it to you. Have fun talking about where Cat lives and her favorite things. Talk about the description of Cat's personality in the second paragraph. Describe how Cat can feel frustrated and cranky when she makes mistakes or things don't turn out perfectly. Explain to your child, "Because Cat struggles with mistakes, she is going to help you learn and practice what to do when you make a mistake or something is not perfect."

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Cat Makes Mistakes

This activity will help your child understand that everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes are a part of learning and are not a big deal.

Materials: Cat; Cranky and Happy Feelings; Feelings from Mixed Pack #2: Uncomfortable and blank Make-Your-Own Feeling—use any washable marker to write Frustrated on one side and draw a frustrated face on the other

- Tuck the Cranky and Frustrated Feelings into Cat's pouch. Ask your child to pull them out.
- Give an example of a time you felt frustrated and got cranky because you made a mistake or couldn't do something as perfectly as you wanted. Start with, "I felt cranky and frustrated when I…" Show your child the facial expression and body language you might have made when you were feeling cranky and frustrated. If it is comfortable for your child, look into a mirror together to make cranky and frustrated faces and bodies. If other family members are available, involve them too.
    - "I felt cranky and frustrated when I (name the time you made a mistake or couldn't do something perfectly). Look at my face. Let's make a cranky and frustrated face together. Look at my cranky and frustrated hands and body. Let's make those together. Let's make cranky and frustrated sounds."
- Tuck the Cranky and Frustrated Feelings into Cat's pouch and ask your child to pull both out. Ask your child he/she can think of a time when he/she felt frustrated because of a mistake or something that didn't come out right or perfectly. Use the same prompt, "I felt cranky and frustrated when…" If your child can't think of a time, give a reminder, "I remember one time when you…" Practice making cranky and frustrated faces and bodies again. If other family members are available, involve them too. Use the prompts above.
- Tuck the Cranky and Frustrated Feelings into Cat's pouch. Ask your child to pull them out. Say, "Cat is playing her tuba, but she makes some mistakes. She feels very frustrated and gets cranky because she likes to play her tuba perfectly. But, Cat has some helpful words she says when she gets frustrated and cranky. She says, 'It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. I can ask for help.' These words remind Cat that she can practice her tuba to get better or ask someone for help."
- Show the Happy Feeling and say, "When Cat remembers that mistakes are part of learning and are not a big deal, she doesn't feel so frustrated or cranky. She may even feel happy."
- Pull the Frustrated, Cranky and Happy Feelings out of Cat's pouch and tell your own story. Say, "I felt frustrated and cranky when…(give an example). I made a mistake painting the kitchen. But I told myself, 'It's not a big deal. I can get help from Daddy.'" Show your child what your face and body looked like when you said it was okay and asked for help. Show the Happy Feeling to indicate how you felt better when you accepted your mistake and got some help. Use the mirror to help your child imitate your face and body. If other family members are available to give examples from their own lives, involve them too.
- Tuck the Frustrated and Cranky Feelings into Cat's pouch and ask your child to pull them out. Ask your child to think of a time he/she felt frustrated and got help. Prompt your child with, "I felt frustrated when… but I got help and…" If your child is unable to think of a time, give an example, "I remember when you…" Ask your child to make a face, body and sound that could show what he/she looked like when he/she said it was okay and got help. If your child felt happy because the frustration got smaller, give him/her the Happy Feeling.

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Prompt and Reinforce Your Child's Efforts with Mistakes and Imperfections

- When you observe your child feeling frustrated and cranky because of a mistake or the need for perfection, acknowledge his/her feelings, Say what you see! "I can see you are getting frustrated." Give your child Cat and the Frustrated and Cranky Feelings. Say, "Remember what Cat taught you to do when you get frustrated or cranky. You can say, 'It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. I can ask for help.'"
- If Cat or the Feelings are not readily available, ask your child, "What would Cat do right now?" "What could Cat say to herself to help her feel better when things don't go perfectly?"
- Prompt your child to say these words before losing control, "It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. I can ask for help." If your child uses a strategy to calm-down, prompt him/her to use it.
- Acknowledge your child when you observe him/her trying to manage his/her mistakes or perfectionism. "I know it was hard for you to get only 1000 points on that video game, but you remembered to think: 'It's no big deal. I can play again.'"
- Help your child develop a realistic view of their achievements by emphasizing what went well on a task. "I noticed that your handwriting is getting really good. Your capital letters are really strong!"
- Remind your child about Cat's strategy right before a task you predict might create frustrated feelings. Prepare your child by saying, "Remember that if you get frustrated and make a mistake, you can say 'It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. I can ask for help.'"
- Let your child color the template at the back of this handout. Put it in a prominent place in the house (on the refrigerator) so your child and family members can use it as a reminder about what to do when a mistake is made or something is not perfect.
- Make a small card with the words "It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. I can ask for help." Add a small drawing of Cat. Your child can keep this card in his/her room, notebook or pocket as a reminder. Make a copy for school. Explain to your child's teacher how you and your child are using the card at home.
- Model how you and other family members use the words to help you when you make mistakes. "When I forgot to put money in the parking meter and got a ticket, I had to remind myself that it's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes."
- Point out examples during the day when adults and kids ask each other for help. "Did you notice that Mommy needed help with the computer? When did your (sisters or brothers) need help? Did you notice that your teacher needed help today?"
- With your child, identify a list of people your child trusts and feels comfortable with. These are people he/she can ask for help when needed. It might be a certain teacher at school, a peer buddy, a sibling, a grandparent, uncle, or parent.
- Talk to your child's teacher to see if he/she could be a helper in some way in the classroom. If your child is good at math, ask if he/she could be a "math buddy" that other students go to for help. This will help your child to build confidence in his/her skills and realize that everyone make mistakes and needs help.
- Be a model of acceptance in your own life. If you tend to be a perfectionist, teach yourself to make mistakes and handle them in a calm, accepting manner.

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Write a Kimochis® Social Narrative

Social narratives are simple stories that you write with your child about challenging situations. These stories can direct your child on what to do; encourage emotional regulation; and promote an increased understanding of the perspectives of others. The narrative acts as a reminder of what Cat taught. In this case, your child needs to remember that it's no big deal when he/she makes a mistake. Here is an example:

It's Okay to Make Mistakes

When I (name what is challenging or needs to be perfect), I like everything to be just perfect. Sometimes I make a mistake and then I feel really frustrated. I might scream and yell. My family and classmates don't want to be around me when I do this. Cat taught me to remember that everyone makes mistakes. Lots of people need help with things. Making mistakes is really no big deal. When I make a mistake, I will try to say words like, "It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. I can ask for help." Then my frustration will get smaller. My teacher and (mom / dad / caregiver) will like it when I try to make my frustration smaller.

Tips for Writing a Kimochis® Social Narrative

- If possible, involve your child in writing the social narrative.
- Write the story in first-person and present tense.
- Begin with a sentence that explains the challenging situation. Using the word "sometimes" or "once in a while" will help your child to understand that difficult situations don't happen all the time.
- Throughout the story, include sentences that explain the situation—what your child sees, what happens, who is involved.
- Include a sentence that describes the feelings and thoughts of others as a way to help your child learn perspective-taking.
- Write a sentence or two describing what to do during the challenging situation.
- Use the example narratives here as a guide, but make sure you individualize it for your child's age, developmental level, situation and experiences.

Read the social narrative several days (and numerous times) before the new experience. This will help your child become familiar with the parts of the narrative. Review the story immediately before the event or experience so the steps are fresh in your child's mind. While reading the story, you can role-play each step with your child. During the event or experience, coach and prompt your child to use the positive behaviors suggested in the story. "Remember that Cat taught you that 'It's no big deal. Everyone makes mistakes. You can ask for help.'" Verbally reinforce your child when he/she changes his/her behavior. Add drawings, pictures or photos (of your child doing the desired behaviors). Having Cat close by when you read the story together may help your child remember what to do.

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We All Get Frustrated Game

- To help your child realize that other family members get frustrated and need help, play the We All Get Frustrated Game.
- Give each family member a cup. Gather up some pennies and nickels and keep them near the cups. Whenever you or other any family members make a mistake or get frustrated, put a penny in your cup. If you realized that the mistake was no big deal and you asked for help, put a nickel in your cup.
- Do this for several days or a week. Check in at dinnertime or a time you are all together to see how much frustration everyone in the family has experienced. Acknowledge each family member, especially your child with autism, for admitting mistakes and getting help when needed.
- Ask everyone to share the times they were able to ask for help. Did it make a difference? How? Continue to play to see if the number of nickels in each cup increases!

Read *Cat's Not-So-Perfect Sandcastle*

In *Cat's Not-So-Perfect Sandcastle,* Cat wants to build the perfect sandcastle. When her friends try to help, Cat's need for perfection and frustration with her friends gets in the way of the fun. When a big wave comes crashing down, she realizes that she's lost more than just her castle.

Sit in a comfortable spot with your child, Cat and the Frustrated, Cranky and Happy Feelings. Read the book aloud. An older child who reads may still enjoy having it read aloud by you or might prefer to read the book to you. Let your child choose. As you move through the book, stop to ask open-ended questions, such as the ones suggested below. These questions are designed to encourage your child to think beyond the text and relate to what is happening to the characters. Point out the facial expressions and body language of the Kimochis® characters in the illustrations. Helping your child to "read" nonverbal communication is an important step to improving social skills. Follow the guidelines below to make reading *Cat's Not-So-Perfect Sandcastle* a positive learning experience.

Before reading the book:

- Ask your child about the title, *Cat's Not-So-Perfect Sandcastle.* "What could it mean? Why do you think Cat would make a not-so-perfect sandcastle?"

While reading the book:

- On the page where Cat is walking to the beach, read the text and ask, "Why do you think Cat wants a perfect sandcastle? Do you think she can make one?"
- On the page where Cat gets frustrated with Cloud ask, "Why did Cat get frustrated? How did she respond to Cloud?"
- On the page where Bug crawled out and the castle collapsed ask, "Why was Cat angry? How did Bug feel?"
- On the page where Cat yells "STOP!" ask, "Why was Cat furious? What did she do? What are her face and body telling us about how she feels? How do the Kimochis® characters feel?"

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- On the page where the wave washed away her castle ask, "How does Cat feel now? What are her face and body telling us about how she feels? Why was the perfect sandcastle not so important anymore?"
- On the page where Cat asked her friends if she could help ask, "How does Cat feel now? Why is she smiling?"
- On the last page ask, "Was it okay that the sandcastle wasn't perfect? Why? How did Cat feel about the not-so-perfect sandcastle?"
- If your child wants to ask questions while you read, that's great! Stop to talk about them.
- Keep Cat nearby while you are reading.

After reading the book:

- Use the Frustrated, Cranky and Happy Feelings and go through the book to find examples of when the Kimochis® characters felt those emotions. Encourage your child to look at facial expressions and body language as well as words.
- Tell a story of a time you wanted something to be perfect, but realized it was okay if it was not-so-perfect. Ask your child, "Can you think of a time that it was okay to have something that was not-so-perfect?" If your child is unable to think of a time, give an example. Talk about the experience and how it was similar to Cat's experience in the book.
- Read the book again and again. Ask different questions and have fun!

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