

# Rethinking Schools *Online*

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## **Q/A: What do I do when I realize I've made a mistake with a child?**

Since you are a person and not some trained robot, chances are that you will make mistakes, such as losing your cool or saying something that you really did not mean to say to a student. We really should try to keep these to a minimum, but when you do make a mistake it is important to acknowledge your error publicly.

One time, for example, I made a comment to a student in front of our class and as soon as I said it, I knew I shouldn't have. I should have been able to control my anger, but I didn't. It was right before lunch, so I had time to consider what I would say upon the students' return to the classroom.

I didn't make a big dramatic scene, but I did apologize in front of everyone. I explained that I had lost my temper. I said that I expected more of the student and his behavior, but more of myself, too. I asked, in front of his peers, if he would accept my apology. He did and we moved on.

It wasn't easy admitting I was wrong in front of 27 kids, but I thought it was important for them to see me as human. It also helped with discipline. When I later had to ask a student to apologize to another for lack of respect of property, feelings, or personal space, the students had already seen me do the same. And they had seen one of their classmates accept an apology rather than continue a cycle of anger and revenge. More often than not, my students were willing to patch things up right there.

— *Stephanie Walters*

It depends on whether the mistake was made in public and whether it embarrassed or humiliated the student. If you messed up in public in a way that was hurtful to a student, then you have to try to correct it in public — to the extent possible. For example, as a new teacher you will likely struggle with maintaining classroom decorum. Depending on the students, the time of year, the time of day, and how much sleep you've had, you may come down on a student in an unfair way. Apologies can be important, and many students will respect a teacher who can admit that he/she made a mistake. It also may go a long way toward repairing a relationship with a member of your class.

Remember, everything you do in class is education, so how you treat people in public is always more than "classroom management." It's also a vital piece of the curriculum.

— *Bill Bigelow*

*Downloaded from the website for The New Teacher Book, published by Rethinking Schools, 2004.*

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