



## Audio Transcript: Parenting on Cue Podcast with Queenie Tan Episode 98

### **POC098: Why it's wrong to say 'what's wrong with you?' How it affects their self image and what to do instead.**

Hi hi, welcome to the Parenting On Cue podcast. Now for today, we're going to talk about why it's wrong to say, "What's wrong with you?" I've heard a parent say this to a child recently, and it brought me back to the times when I was little, and my mom would say that all the time.

And when I had children of my own, I caught myself just about to say that a couple of times, I'm very glad that I'm aware and I was able to catch myself before I did it. And I thought that you know, and when I heard it last week, I thought, okay, maybe it's time to bring this up again and to have a little discussion about it. Now, it's so so easy when we get frustrated with our children to say, "what's wrong with you?" If we take some time to just look at this, look at this phrase, you can see, you know, how many problems there are with it.

Firstly, when you ask them, "what's wrong with you?" you automatically assume that there is something wrong with them, okay, and that does not reflect very well on their positive self-image. If somebody is constantly assuming that there's something wrong you, it's really hard for you to feel that you're actually worth something, that you matter, that people around you care about you.

So, yeah, so when you say, "what's wrong with you?" the first thing that usually happens is that you know, children assume that there's something wrong with them. And if we keep on saying it, then it's going to become a part of how they see themselves, And if they did do something wrong, and you say, "what's wrong with you?", it will very likely lead to them being very defensive, and they will likely lie, because they don't want to be seen as being wrong, anymore wrong then you already perceive them to be, and if they're innocent then they will just assume that you're waiting for them to mess up and to be wrong, because that's your assumption anyway and, you know, you're just waiting for them to prove you right.

So, either way, it does not reflect well on a child. And I think, at the end of the day, we need to release doubt and think about our mindset, about how we view things that are wrong and how we view mistakes because, this is the thing in Asian culture, where we view mistakes as a bad thing, it's viewed as something that you need to avoid at all costs, and you know making mistakes is bad and it's wrong and, you know, if you just shut up and listen to your parents and do exactly what they tell you to do then you can avoid making all these mistakes. A lot of times they're also viewed as totally unnecessary is a waste of time, waste of effort, waste of resources, mistakes are just not viewed well, especially in the Asian context, but I'm pretty sure that a lot of our Western counterparts might have this same mindset as well.

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But, here's the thing though, children learn through trial and error, I mean we all do, we all do that. And, it's not fair if we are allowed to learn through trial and error, and our children aren't. And we learn through trial and error; it's just very natural that you make mistakes, it's very natural, you can't run away from it.

So, I think that in my mind, making mistakes is a very natural part of learning, okay? You make a mistake if you break something, then you clean it up, if you make a mess, then you clean it up if you say something wrong, you apologise. So, there's always a way to fix it. And, it's not just about fixing mistakes, but it's also about learning from mistakes, so, I mean, I always tell my boys that they can make as many mistakes as they want. So long as they don't make the same mistakes twice.

Because we are expected to learn from our mistakes, so, we make a lot of mistakes, you know, it's assumed that we learn a lot because we learn that there are some things we can do differently; there are some things that we really shouldn't do. "Okay that was really unnecessary and dumb, let's not attempt that again".

But, if we look at child developmental psychology, we can see that children learn through trial and error, they learn through experience, and this is because they have this very concrete understanding of things, they need to have a concrete understanding of things, and they're very different from adults, you know as such, because adults can do passive learning, we already have the fundamental understanding of how things work.

So, if I were to explain to you, "I'm going to teach you how to make banana bread, first, you need to take a measuring cup, and you need to measure out two cups of flour", so, when I'm saying that, in your mind, you're imaging two cups of flour and you probably know what it's like to scoop up flour with a cup and put it into big bowls. You have all that fundamental understanding already.

But young children are still in the process of putting that fundamental understanding of how things work together. So, if you say, "put two cups of flour together" they're like, "huh? what does that even mean?", and so you have to literally give them a cup, let them scoop it out and put into bowls so they can see what it looks like, they can see what the whole process is like, they can experience it first hand, so that is what we call experiential learning and also what we call a very concrete understanding of how things work. It's not abstract, yet.

But, with enough interaction with the things that they come in contact with, with the environment, they will eventually have a pretty good fundamental understanding of how things work. In which case, when they reach elementary or primary school, they will be ready for slightly more abstract thinking, and abstract ideas.

So, for the time being, really young children under the age of 6, 7, they still need hands-on experience. And you know if you tell them, "okay if you put too much water, you pour too much water, in the cup, it will overflow," and they'll be like, "hmm, I wonder what overflow means, I wonder what it looks like."

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So, they will purposely go into it, so that they can see, “ooooh that’s what overflow is, I understand it now.” So, these are just things that they have to experience, and that’s why even for my boys I tell them, my boys are teenage and pre-teen already, and I still tell them, “you can make as many mistakes as you want, just not the same ones twice.” So, that gives them a bit more courage to go and try stuff out, to go and experiment, to take a bit more risk and to see how things work out. They are free to hypothesize, to prove their theories wrong, to prove them right, and this is what learning is about.

And even when we are learning a different language, we are constantly trying, we may not know if the pronunciation is right, but we try anyway, we take that risk, we try anyway, and then people around us will correct us, will show us what’s the right way of doing it, of pronouncing it, and, what are the right words to use, and we make lots of mistakes along the way. I absolutely love learning different languages, and there are a lot of times I’ve been corrected, it’s very embarrassing, because when you are trying to learn different languages, you’re always experimenting with different things and there were a few times where I said a few very embarrassing things that I didn’t mean to say, it’s just that I directly translated it and it came out wrong, and everyone had a good laugh, and I turned pink, and you know, life goes on.

But, that’s the thing about learning, if you’re not afraid to make mistakes you can go so far with your learning. And, likewise with young children, if we don’t instil fear in them for doing something wrong, or for making mistakes, they can take their learning to, they can really optimize their learning, and to get to the next level. So, I urge you to reconsider how you view mistakes and how you view their being wrong.

Now, so, instead of saying, “what’s wrong with you?”, may I suggest that we say, to replace that, to say, “what’s happening here?”, because I think a lot of times we don’t consider things from a child’s view. And we say, “okay what’s happening here?”, it means that ‘okay, what you have to say matters to me, I really want to know your point of the story and let me know, I’m just going to sit and listen.’ So, when you say that, “what’s happening here?”, you’re coming from a more...you’re more like a detective, you’re coming more from an inquiry viewpoint, not like an interrogative accusation viewpoint.

You’re coming from a very innocent place, just wanting to know more, wanting to know what’s happening here, and when we are not in a place of accusing them or insinuating that they’re making a mistake or assuming that they’re wrong, they’re more likely to open up to us, let their guard down, open up to us, and tell us what’s happening. Even sometimes if it was a mistake or something that they didn’t mean to do, they’ll be more open to telling us stuff, and I like that, I don’t really feel like if children fear us, that they’ll be open with us. If they fear us, they’re more likely to lie, because they’re afraid, they’re more likely to skirt the whole question and to get defensive, and that’s not really a good place for open communication or honest communication to happen.

So, every time I walk into a group of children or when I walk into my boys, and they look like something has happened, that is quite dramatic, I’m like, “okay, what’s happening here?” And they’re more open to telling me stuff, so I’m hoping that by sharing this with you, that you can start to see things different, hopefully, make a small switch in your mindset and by changing your vocabulary a little bit. I know that

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this type of switch doesn't happen overnight, a lot of times in my parenting groups we are, especially in my parenting mastermind groups, they have a lot of support for me and other group members, and over a period of time, they are able to slowly change their minds. It's not going to happen overnight and, I mean, the environment that gave you that mindset isn't going to be the same environment that will change your mindset.

So, you have to change your environment you have to change, to some extent, your circle of influence and that's why it's always great to be a part of a support group. So that you can be positively influenced, and you have opportunities to really engage in conversations, you know difficult conversations like this one, where you can properly brainstorm ideas and just tear up all these assumptions that we have and to look at it differently.

Okay, so thank you so much for listening and, until next week, remember - happy and confident parents have happy and confident children. Okay, so don't forget to check out the show notes at [www.parentingoncue.com/98](http://www.parentingoncue.com/98) for episode number 98, to continue the conversation, I think to get the transcript, and if you go to the link and you scroll to the bottom, there will be a chat box where you can leave your questions and your comments and I will jump right into it. Thank you, and remember, until next week, happy and confident parents have happy and confident children.