Correct Mistakes Promptly

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Honest questions, quick corrections, and early reporting protect clients, coworkers, and the work we do together.

Every person who works in ABA will make mistakes. A session note gets saved with the wrong time. A code is entered incorrectly. A signature is missed. These things happen in busy, people-centered work.

The goal is not to be perfect. As one guiding principle puts it: "We don't expect perfection. We expect honesty, attention to detail, and a willingness to correct mistakes."

This article explains how to tell the difference between an honest mistake and dishonesty. It also covers why early questions, prompt correction, and early reporting matter so much.

Honest Mistakes and Dishonesty Are Different

"You're going to make mistakes. Everyone does. What matters is how you respond."

An honest mistake happens when someone gets something wrong without meaning to. They may have misunderstood a rule, missed a detail, or been rushed. An honest mistake is not automatically fraud.

That does not mean a mistake can be ignored. Mistakes still need to be addressed. A wrong date, an incorrect billing entry, or an incomplete note can affect a client's record and the claims an organization submits.

Dishonesty is a choice. It looks like knowingly recording something that did not happen, changing records to hide an error, or leaving a known problem in place and hoping no one notices.

Organizations can work through a lot. They can correct mistakes, provide more training, and clear up misunderstandings. What they cannot accept is dishonesty.

The law reflects this difference too. The federal False Claims Act focuses on false claims made "knowingly." That term includes actual knowledge, and it also includes deliberate ignorance or reckless disregard of the truth. In practical terms, once you know something is wrong, choosing to look away is not a safe option.

Ask Questions and Fix Mistakes Early

Many problems start small. A question that never gets asked can turn into a habit, and a habit can turn into a pattern of errors.

Asking questions is a sign of care. It shows that you want to do the work correctly.

Here are some practical habits for RBTs and BCBAs:

Ask when you are unsure. If you do not understand a documentation rule, a billing code, or a policy, ask before you guess.

Check your work before you submit it. Look at dates, times, names, and service details.

Fix errors as soon as you notice them. Do not wait for someone else to find them.

Tell your supervisor what happened. A short, factual explanation is enough. For example: "I entered the wrong session time on Tuesday's note. I wanted to let you know so we can correct it."

Follow the correct process for changes. Corrections should be made openly and through the proper steps. Never alter records in a way that hides what was there before.

A mistake that is corrected promptly is usually much easier to fix than one that sits for weeks or months.

Speak Up Without Waiting for Proof

Sometimes the concern is not your own mistake. You may notice something that seems off in a coworker's notes, a schedule, or a billing pattern.

The guidance here is simple: "If something seems wrong, speak up."

You do not need to investigate. You do not need to be certain. You do not need to have every detail figured out.

"You do not have to wait until you can prove fraud. Promptly report the concern."

Your role is to share what you saw or what seemed inappropriate. It is the organization's job to look into it. Many concerns turn out to have a simple explanation. Some turn out to be honest mistakes that need correcting. Either way, raising the concern early helps.

It is also worth knowing that employees and others may have legal protections when they report suspected violations or take part in certain protected reporting activities. The False Claims Act includes protections against retaliation for people who take lawful steps related to reporting false claims.

A Note for Supervisors

How a supervisor responds when someone comes forward shapes whether people will speak up next time.

When a staff member reports their own mistake or raises a concern, a few things help:

Thank them. Coming forward takes courage, especially for newer staff.

Stay calm. A steady response helps people feel safe being honest.

Focus on the fix. Work together on what needs to be corrected and how.

Offer support or training if needed. Many mistakes point to a gap in understanding, not a lack of care.

Follow through. Make sure the concern is handled through the proper process.

Teams are more honest when honesty is met with respect. Supervisors set that tone.

Moving Forward With Confidence

You do not have to be perfect to do this work well. You need to be honest, pay attention, and be willing to make things right.

Ask questions early. Correct mistakes promptly. Speak up when something seems wrong, even if you are not sure.

These habits protect the clients we serve, the people we work with, and the trust that makes good care possible.

References

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

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