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WELL-BEING FOCUS: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

“It wasn’t my fault” and “he made me do it” are phrases children like to put on repeat. A parent’s and a teacher’s job is to help children learn to take responsibility for their actions, both because it’s right and because it helps teach them cause and effect. A lesson that will serve them well for life.

It’s a fact of human nature: no one likes to be wrong.

- We don’t want to get in trouble.
- We don’t want to face negative consequences.
- We want the easy way out.

This goes for men, women, young and old.

Blame shifting (n): a tactic to push fault on another person. Essentially, blame shifting happens when children blame others or external circumstances on their behaviour. Whether they did something wrong, failed to do something right, or feel a certain way, they are reluctant to own up to their own part or responsibility. They shift the burden of blame and/or action on others.

“He started it!”

“She was there with me!”

“I can’t help it.”

Ultimately, children don’t want to displease adults. They want us to be happy, not angry. But it’s human nature to test boundaries and try new things, even if those are forbidden. While we shouldn’t be alarmed when this happens, it’s something we should most definitely work to curb for quite a few reasons.

1. Allowing blame shifting robs them of one of life’s most important lessons.

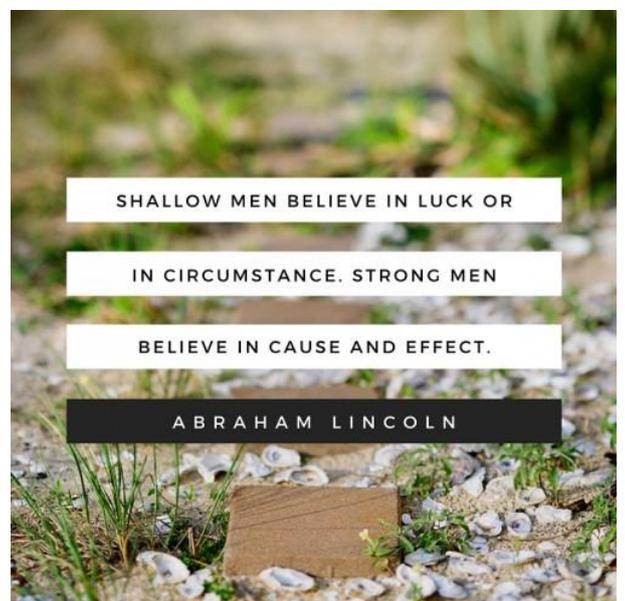
One of the great life lessons we can help our children take hold of in childhood is cause and effect. Children need to learn – for their own good! – That it’s important to take responsibility for their actions. To own up to their mistakes. To be the master of their own responses.

Example: If one child takes something off the other and the response is a kick, there are two things happening. One, a child swiped a possession. Two, a child responded with a kick. Both have a level of responsibility and it’s important that both parties shoulder the responsibility for their own choices. Excusing bad behaviour (in response to another bad behaviour) just says, “Sure you can hit/slap/scream if someone does something unpleasant to you.”

2. Blame shifting encourages passivity.

There are times when children will do something (like colour on the walls or take money, in an extreme example) and deny it or blame it on someone else. There are other times, however, when they will fail to do something and blame it on external circumstances of people.

Example: Your child has a deadline for school, waits until the night before it’s due, then realises the printer is out of ink, and there isn’t a replacement. This is not your fault as the parent for not having one ready. The work still has to be done and now it’s time to find another way. Blame shifting says, “Oh well, it’s not my fault they were out of ink. I’ll just have to turn it in late and hope it’s excused.” Problem solving says, “Is there somewhere else I can go – perhaps to a family member’s house? – and print it? I won’t do this again!” That is recognising that they must now deal with their choice to delay work and find another solution.



3. Blame shifting discourages ownership.

Blame shifting says, “this is someone else’s problem, not mine.” Well sometimes that’s true. But sometimes it isn’t. By reminding your child they own their choices, emotions, and decisions you are actually empowering them to change their situations. Those who feel that “life happens to them” do not set and meet goals. They feel at the mercy of life. They feel robbed if luck doesn’t go their way. Instead of working harder and persevering they blame life or fate for their situation.

4. Blame shifting increases pride and decreases the capacity for humility.

Some children quickly try to blame shift anytime it’s clear someone is in trouble. It’s often a struggle to get the child to admit they are wrong. But, when given enough time to think about what happened, the desire to make things right is born. This is humility.

However, if the child isn’t given time to swallow their pride and see where they hurt another, humility and empathy don’t rise to the surface. This often requires reflection time.

Suggestions for parents to discourage blame shifting:

- Hold each child accountable for their actions, not the one who “started it.”
- Notice when your child fails to take responsibility for their actions and gently remind them where the responsibilities lay.
- Make honesty easy. If you want your child to come to you with the truth (or admit to it when asked), try to keep your cool when expressing your dissatisfaction about their poor behaviour. Being calm and approachable makes it easier -- and more likely -- that they'll fess up in the future. Let them know everyone makes mistakes and what matters most is that they are truthful, learn from the situation, and tries to right the wrongs. Then, discuss what they could have done differently, how they can make it better, and any consequences. Don't forget to praise their honesty if they owned up to their actions.
- Require children to follow through with what they start.
- Help your children own age-appropriate tasks and chores by enforcing consequences if they go undone.
- Stick to the rules. We all allow some things to slide on occasion. But if you often let your child's adorable face, charming ways, or pitiful pleading persuade you not to enforce punishment, your child learns that they don't have to take the rules seriously and can convince you to go easy on them. To be accountable, they need to learn to accept the consequences of their words, actions, and decisions, and the only way they'll do so is if you're consistent with rules and discipline
- Help your kids learn to problem solve and ask questions when they feel powerless.
- Discourage self-pity by having them think outside themselves.
- Don't become the referee.