

Teaching Children to Be Accountable for their Behavior and Choices

Many parents understand the importance of setting clear limits for children and using appropriate consequences when children overstep those limits. But is that enough to help children be accountable for their actions? Here are Marti's practical tips on helping children develop the important quality of personal accountability:

I. What does it mean for a person to be “accountable”?

- Accepting responsibility for your own actions
- Recognizing the impact of your actions on others
- Taking steps to right the wrong you've done to others

II. What parents can do to promote accountability

- 1) Have a “no excuses” policy
This means, for example, that if your son tries to blame someone else (“He called me a bad name!”), that does not excuse the fact that your child chose to hit someone. Your son needs to be responsible for his own action. (And yes, the other child also should be responsible for calling your son a bad name. But that doesn't excuse your son's behavior.)
- 2) Be empathic and calm
You will be most effective in teaching accountability if you stay calm and matter-of-fact, rather than responding with anger. Express understanding and empathy (e.g. “I know you didn't like it when your friend called you a bad name”), but still hold your child responsible for his behavior and impose a consequence (e.g. “...but you still made an unacceptable choice when you hit him, so you lose your screen time for this evening). Or, better yet, ask your child what he thinks a fair consequence would be.
- 3) Expect children to admit and apologize
For example, a friend's 8th grade daughter confessed to her mom that she had cheated on a science test. The mother insisted that her daughter call the teacher and admit to him that she cheated (a very embarrassing thing) and apologize for betraying his trust. She then had to re-take the exam under close supervision so she couldn't look at her “cheat sheet.” (The teacher was gracious in letting her retake the exam instead of getting a failing grade!)
- 4) Engage children in deciding how to make restitution
For example, when one of my grandchildren intentionally damaged one of his brother's toys (something he thought was “a piece of junk,” even though his brother liked it), he not only had to admit his action and apologize to his brother, but also had to work out a plan to use his own money to replace the broken toy. That is being accountable.

Note: After any misbehavior, it's helpful to ask the child to think about what he or she could do differently the next time. Then, let go and move on!