

It's Not My Fault!

by SHAUNTI FELDHAHN

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“WHAT DID YOU DO?!”
Kelly raced outside, horrified at the sight of her neighbor's shattered bay window—and her 14-year-old son and his buddies scattering across the back yard.

She didn't feel any better when she corralled the boys.

“I didn't know a football could break glass!”

“I told Paul not to throw it so hard!”

“That was the only part of the yard without trees . . . shouldn't have broken it . . . a fluke thing . . . not our fault . . .”

Kelly wanted to scream.

“We've told you not to play ball back there. . . .”

“But we weren't playing, we were just tossing the ball around!”

“And more important,” Kelly stared down her son, “Why did you guys run away? I'm really bothered that you tried to avoid taking responsibility! We'll talk about that later, but right now you go tell Mrs. Cabbott you're sorry and you all will pay for the window out of your lawn-mowing money.”

Excuses, Excuses...

It can be troubling to watch our children try to conceal wrongdoing, excuse it, justify it, or blame others. While one of my children is very willing to tell the truth, another has struggled with a pattern of evasion. As I wrestle with how to help her, it helps me realize that she's not alone: this is the universal tendency of sinful humanity.

Doubt it? Just think about the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ate the fruit God told them not to eat. When they heard him coming later in the day, they hid. When He exposed their behavior, they blamed Him, blamed someone else, or essentially said, “We were tricked!”

Sound familiar?

Mistakes are a natural part of being human. Unfortunately, so is blaming someone else. Find out how you can help your teen come to grips with—and take responsibility for—their miscues.



(Your calmness dramatically improves a teen's willingness to step forward.) While some circumstances (that broken window) do demand an immediate response, it may still be valuable to delay "the talk" for a little while.

Second, signal your love to draw them out of hiding. As His children cowered in the bushes, God asked, "Where are you?" Did the omnipotent God of the universe need help finding them? No, and Adam and Eve knew that. Instead, God was pulling them out with an approach that said, "Even though you have done very wrong, I want to see you and talk to you."

In my national survey of teens for my book *For Parents Only*, one of the clear-

est needs expressed by teens was for parents to signal that no matter what they had done, their parents loved them and would be there for them. Otherwise, teens assume their parents' love is dependent on not making mistakes. In response, two-thirds of teens said they would protect themselves against that pain by closing off their hearts.

Third, recognize their fear—and minimize it by establishing consequences ahead of time. Adam said he hid because he was "afraid." Everyone who has done wrong is afraid of being found out, of disappointing someone, or of the consequences they will face. So they give in to the temptation to do or say anything to avoid getting into trouble.

That can look like a hard or rebellious heart, but if you know your child, you can discern when it is actually fear. As

How can we help our kids become responsible truth-tellers who own up to their actions instead of habitually trying to weasel out of trouble? Although I've spent years researching how teens and pre-teens think, I'd found no answers until I realized how God approached Adam and Eve in the garden. I've been trying to apply God's five-part strategy in my own household and have seen a noticeable difference in my preteen's willingness to acknowledge her faults.

First, don't respond immediately—allow conviction to work. God surely knew the moment His children ate the fruit. But it's fascinating to see how He allowed some time to pass before approaching them. Just as Adam and Eve's eyes were opened, your teen probably knows he has done wrong because

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the Holy Spirit will be working in his heart well before you do.

While that doesn't guarantee you'll get no excuses, it does mean the immediate emotions will be calmed, and you'll have time to think about your approach.

one pastor put it, "You parent a fearful child very differently than you parent a rebellious child."

That fear—and the excuses that often come with it—is far more likely if the child isn't sure about the consequences he'll face. In my research, another major pattern was the teens' worry that when they did wrong, they weren't sure what to expect. When I was interviewing my own daughter for this article, she gave a stunning explanation for why some kids aren't willing to admit wrongdoing: "We just don't know what is going to happen if we tell the truth. Parents are giving different punishments, and you never know which it's going to be."

"Until I heard her say that, I would have thought that the entire responsibility was the child's," my husband later told me. "But we have a responsibility, too. We have to make sure they are able to trust us."

Sit down with your teen at least once or twice a year to set expectations and get their input on what consequences will come with what infractions.

Fourth, don't just confront the wrongdoing, but also get to the reason behind it. God directly asked, "Did you eat the fruit?" to give His children a chance to confess; but He also asked about what was going on underneath the surface.

In his book *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, author Tedd Tripp says, "All behavior is linked to some attitude of the heart. Therefore, discipline must address attitudes of the heart." The parents' responsibility, then, is to uncover the sin and help the teen understand the relationship between actions and the heart.

"You must learn to work from the behavior you see back to the heart, exposing heart issues for your children," Tripp writes. "You must learn to engage them, not just reprove them."

Excuses diminish as your teenager becomes used to not only confronting wrong behavior (breaking the window and running away), but also recognizing that the behavior stems from selfishness (caring more about their own desire to play football than about the risk or cost to others). They will understand for

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themselves their need to rely on the grace and strength of Christ.

This also means the key to helping your teen want to take responsibility is praising him when you see a good heart attitude, especially when you see him stepping out in courage to admit fault. As my daughter told me, "Even when you know you'll be in trouble for doing something wrong, you feel good that you did something right and were honest about it. You want that warm feeling in your heart."



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Fifth, allow consequences—and walk through it with them. God loved His children, and He allowed them to experience the consequences of their actions.

“Over time, consequences act as a teacher, helping our teens learn how things operate in the real world,” explains Dr. Bill Maier of Focus on the Family.

At the same time, though, God actively showed His children love by clothing them so they would not be ashamed. And even though they were removed from the garden, He did not remove Himself from their lives.

Your teenager will almost certainly continue to make mistakes—and some may have serious consequences. Sometimes, allowing your teen to feel the brunt of those consequences may be the very best medicine for her. But even in those cases, you have to continue to let your teen know that you will be facing the consequences together.

Even if you do all that you can do, there's no guarantee that your child will always take responsibility. You might get frustrated at times, but don't give up. As you approach them in the way God approached His children, demonstrating not only firmness but love and security, they are far more likely to see the benefit of responding in honesty. You can point them to Christ's strength to help them have the courage that they, deep down, want to have. And that will be the best possible incentive for them to mature and to put an end to the blame game.

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Paying the Price

by LYNN PRYOR

SPEEDING TICKETS. YOU'VE PROBABLY never received one, but I've been stopped ... oh, once or twice. I get upset with myself for speeding, but I don't blame the officer. I readily acknowledge my "error." I've even thanked the policeman for doing his job as he hands me that wonderful piece of paper. But there was this one time ...

I had just spoken at a church in a rural town in southwest Tennessee. It was late and no other cars were around, but I was pulled over as I left the city limits. I was only a few miles over the limit, and it was a construction zone. But there were no signs (or evidence) of a construction zone. Nor was there a posted speed limit. I was truly ignorant of the laws I had broken. What could I do? The officer gave me the phone number of the judge and said I could explain it to him, but he was still writing me a ticket.

So I called the judge. His response? "We live in an unincorporated town. We have no taxes. This is how we make our money. Just pay the ticket, and it will never show up on your insurance."

Even though I was truly ignorant of this town's laws, I was still guilty of violating one of those laws. In the end, I faced my responsibility and paid the ticket.

We often try to justify our actions. We shift the blame for the things we do wrong to someone else. But we are still responsible. Our faults, errors, mistakes—our sins—must be acknowledged and dealt with. It's one thing to pay a speeding ticket. It's quite another to pay for your sin.

Thankfully, God offers us a solution. As we acknowledge our sins, we also acknowledge that there is nothing we can do on our own to remove them. But Jesus can—and did. He paid the penalty for your sins on the cross. All that remains is to accept His offer of paying for your sins and trust Him to forgive you and give you a new life.

It's as simple as a prayer: *Dear God, I know I am a sinner and have rebelled against You in many ways. I believe Jesus died for my sin and only through faith in His death and resurrection can I be forgiven and have peace. I now turn from my sin and ask Jesus to come into my life as my Savior and Lord. From this day forward, I choose to follow Jesus.*

If you prayed that prayer (or one like it), tell someone about your decision. Get involved with a church—a group of fellow Christians—and start growing in your relationship with God.