

# Kids and Excuses: Why Children Justify Their Behavior

By Janet Lehman Empowering Parents



“All day long, all I hear from my kids are things like, ‘It wasn’t my fault! He started it!’ and ‘She called me a name so I hit her.’ All the finger-pointing and blaming makes me want to scream. Why can’t they ever take responsibility for themselves?”

Why do kids make excuses? Here’s the truth: It’s really not as important to know *why* they do it as it is to know how to deal with their behavior. When you think about it, we all make excuses from time to time. You might know the speed limit, but when you’re pulled over by the police you may try to justify why you were speeding by telling the officer that you were late for work. This is the same thing children do when they say things like, “The teacher didn’t explain the assignment—that’s why I couldn’t do my homework.” And your child is not the only one—all kids try to wriggle out of consequences for their mistakes or for bad behavior. Kids see this happening everywhere—on TV, in the classroom, with their friends and sometimes from us!

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## **Excuses, Excuses: How It Starts**

Chronic excuse-making in kids may start out subtly. The trouble begins when blaming others works to get them out of consequences. This is when it can become a much bigger part of their personality, because they’re using it to solve their problems. Keep in mind that while your goal is to teach your child to take responsibility instead of blaming others, his goal is probably to get out of being punished.

Why is it so important to address excuse-making? As your child grows up and becomes an adult, the people in his life won’t accept excuses for his behavior. His high school and college teachers won’t accept them, his spouse won’t want to hear

them all the time and his boss certainly won't put up with it. The legal system doesn't really care about excuses, either.

As a therapist who worked with tough adolescents in group homes for years, I heard every excuse you can imagine. Instead of getting sucked into an argument, we focused on getting the kids to take responsibility. Sometimes we would catch kids in the act of sneaking out at night, and they'd still try to tell us it wasn't their fault! Our method of dealing with the situation was to:

- Describe the situation objectively: "You were caught sneaking out after lights out."
- State the problem simply and clearly: "It's against the rules and it's a safety concern."
- Tell them what the consequences would be: "You won't be allowed to go on the group outing to the mall tomorrow."

As the adults in charge of these teens, we did not get into all the reasons why they had misbehaved—we just handled the situation in a businesslike way. This is a good thing to keep in mind as a parent, because all too often we can get sucked into the fighting and emotionalism of the moment and lose sight of the goal: to teach our kids to be more responsible. Here are eight things you can do when your child tries to blame others for his actions:

**Catch your child in the excuse.** One of the best things you can do is catch your child when he's blaming someone—or something—for his actions, and then call him out. You can say, "It sounds like you're blaming your friend for the fact that you came home past curfew without calling me." Turn it around and let your child know that no matter what, in your eyes they are accountable for their own choices and behavior. Don't let yourself get confused or drawn into an argument. Stick to the facts.

**Focus on the real issue.** What is the problem behavior? Is it that your son hits his siblings, or your daughter doesn't do her schoolwork? Once you recognize the behavior, you can name it and then get your child to look at it. Again, avoid being sidetracked. Be clear about what you see and what happened. Don't let them get away with changing the subject, because in the end it will only hurt your child who's blaming everyone and everything for his bad behavior.

**Keep it simple.** Name the behavior that is the problem (for example, not doing assigned homework), name the choice they made (not asking for help), and then come up with one or two different things your child could do next time. (Ask for help from the teacher or talk friends in class.) Reinforce the plan—and keep it simple.

**Do a re-enactment of the incident.** Another thing you can say is, "Let's pretend someone had a video camera and could watch what was going on. What would they have recorded just now?"

**Your child:** "My sister took my iPod, so I hit her."

**You:** "There were lots of other things you could have done other than hit her. What can you do differently next time so you don't get in trouble?"

**Your child:** “I don’t know. I guess I could put my stuff on a higher shelf so she can’t get to it.”

If your child can’t come up with an idea, you might help them.

**You:** “You could also come and tell me about it and I’ll take care of it.”

This works well with kids and gives you—and your child—a more objective way to look at the situation.

**Be active.** Your role as a parent is to set limits, teach and coach your child. Part of that is to actively teach what is appropriate and what isn’t through role modeling. If we as parents happen to make excuses for our behavior and catch ourselves at it, it’s okay to go to our kids and say, “When I came home from work tonight I was really cranky. I could’ve handled it better—I didn’t need to scream. Sorry for being in such a bad mood. Next time I’ll take some time to relax before I walk through the door after a bad day.” So you’re modeling taking responsibility for the behavior, and you’re letting your family know how you will try to handle it in the future.

**Be committed.** Commit yourself to the process of challenging faulty thinking in your child—and keep at it. Just because you’re able to cut past the excuse to the behavior one time doesn’t mean the behavior is going to stop, or that your child won’t find another way to deflect or change the subject. You have to commit yourself to addressing the behavior, and be vigilant.

**Stay calm and focused.** When you talk to your kids, try to stay calm and focused. Yelling and screaming is not going to help. Sit with your child and look at what actually happened. Review the behavior. “You pushed your brother. There’s no excuse for abuse. How can you avoid this next time?” Doing a role play where your son plays the part of his brother and you play his part can be helpful. During this role play, you can practice what he can do next time this happens. That will give him an additional skill, and will help him not only own his behavior but will also give him a problem solving skill other than hitting.

Be sure to tie the consequence you give him to the behavior. If your child has knocked his brother down, the consequence is for that action. The fact is that your child chose to respond to that situation by using force. All the excuses in the world don’t change that. Maybe his little brother shouldn’t have been there, maybe he shouldn’t have grabbed his cell phone—but it doesn’t take away from the fact that he chose to knock him down.

**Making amends:** Once your child acknowledges his mistake, have him make amends if the situation warrants it. If your son hit his sister, he may need to write a note of apology or do a chore for her—but after that, move on. It’s a very difficult thing to learn to take responsibility for behavior but once you start, it gets easier. Realize that everyone makes excuses, but the most important piece is taking that responsibility and making amends.

**Remind your child that she has choices.** It’s empowering to know that we all have choices in life—and that goes for your kids, too. They’re making a choice to either

follow the rules or not follow the rules; there is a moment in time when they choose misbehavior instead of the right behavior, or vice versa. If your teen daughter is with friends and realizes she is going to be late for curfew, she has the choice to text you and let you know—or to call and ask for a ride. Blaming her friends for her inability to get home on time is not a valid excuse. She's not a victim or powerless to change the outcome of her actions each time she steps out of the house. The best part? The more your child takes ownership of her actions, the more empowered—and responsible—she will become