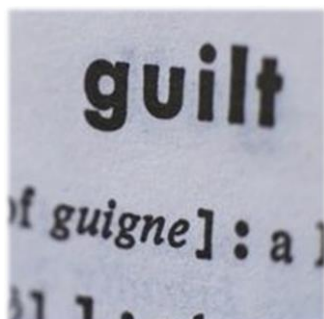


# Parenting Truth: You Are Not to Blame for Your Child's Behaviour

By Kim Abraham and Marney Studaker-Cordner from Empowering Parents



"I wouldn't be in trouble at school if my mom had just written me an excuse," complained a teen I was counselling recently. "And the teacher didn't have to fail me—he could've let me off with a warning!"

As I listened to this bright 15-year-old kid explain why everyone was at fault for his situation (except himself), I encouraged him to take personal responsibility for his own choices. He looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language or had lost my mind.

Rather than being the exception, I think this example has become the rule. From politicians to celebrities to our kids, no one seems able to admit they were wrong or take responsibility these days. Everyone seems to be playing the blame game.

## **We Live in a Culture of Blame**

As parents, we expect our children to do what so many people don't – take responsibility. Nothing is more irritating than hearing your child whine, "It's not my fault!" Kids often blame their teachers for their academic performance and their siblings for their misdeeds. And why not? Blaming others is modelled for our children daily by adults, their peers, and the news.

It's so easy to focus on others when something goes wrong that we often don't even realize we're doing it too. Blaming others has become so widespread that it's striking when someone actually does take responsibility.

In a meeting recently, a co-worker made the statement, "You know what? I didn't follow through with that task. I apologise. It was my fault. I'll do it now, and it won't happen again." It was refreshing to hear those words. I complimented the woman afterward on taking personal accountability for her actions. In our society, blame is so commonplace that we're often surprised when someone owns up to something with no excuses.

## **Hey Mom, Can You Hang on to My Responsibility for a Minute?**

As parents, it can be difficult to watch our kids struggle and experience negative consequences in life. When your child was a baby, you were entirely responsible for her—what she ate, her safety, everything. You were her caregiver. As your child got older, little by little, you started giving her more responsibility. You wanted her to become more independent. But with independence comes choices—and responsibility. It can be intimidating and scary for both you and your child to let go of that caregiving relationship.

Transitioning from taking total responsibility for your child to allowing her to make mistakes so she can learn and grow from them can be a tough process. We expect our kids to get it wrong sometimes. That's just life.

It's also part of human nature to be uncomfortable when you have to admit you've made a mistake or a poor choice. It's hard to own that you've let someone down or hurt them. Most of us don't want others to think badly of us, and we may worry that we'll be judged harshly or thought less of as a result of our behaviour.

We also may want to avoid negative consequences for our actions. After all, when was the last time you said, "Yes, officer, I was speeding, and I deserve that ticket!?" It's the same for our kids. They don't like to feel discomfort any more than adults do. But discomfort is how we learn and grow—by recognising and acknowledging our mistakes and then doing things differently in the future, so we don't feel uncomfortable that way again.

### **Why Does Everyone Always Blame the Parents for the Child's Behaviour?**

In society today, there's been a growing trend of blaming parents for a child's behaviour. Whenever there's a tragedy or a child behaves in a dangerous, harmful, irresponsible, or wrong way, people always ask, "Where were his parents?!" And parents, particularly those with kids struggling with poor behaviour choices, have taken this to heart, internalizing and often blaming themselves.

Parents will say, "If I hadn't had to work as much, maybe my son wouldn't be so angry. Maybe he wouldn't get into fights. He tells me all the time it's my fault, and maybe he's right." But by saying this, the child gets the message that he's not responsible for his behaviour and choices—his parents are. Unfortunately, this can lead to a lifetime pattern of blaming others and refusing to take responsibility. It will always be his spouse's fault, the boss's fault, the police officer's fault, or the legal system's fault.

In short, blaming yourself for your child's behaviour is not effective—it makes you feel terrible, and it doesn't help your child.



### **Keep the Focus on Your Child's Behaviour**

So stop blaming yourself. Instead, keep the focus where it belongs—on your child's behaviour. The teen I was talking about earlier wanted the focus on anything other than his poor choices and behaviour at school. He would shift attention to his mom so she would be in trouble rather than himself. When you hear someone trying to blame, respond with:

*"Let's stay focused on the issue and the behaviour we want to address right now."*

## **Learn to Balance Parental Responsibility with Child Accountability**

Balance your parental responsibility with your child's accountability. Ask yourself, "Who is ultimately responsible for my child's choice in this situation?"

If you find you need to put more effort into modelling certain behaviours for your child, that's fine. Accept responsibility for what you feel is your job as a parent and allow your child to accept responsibility for his job as a child preparing for adulthood. Your ultimate goal is to raise a child who will be able to function responsibly in the adult world.

## **Keep the Big Picture in Mind**

Yes, you gave birth to your child. You guide him, care for him, and prepare him for the real world. But he's here as more than just your child. He's here to make this life his own, to learn, and to grow. Blaming yourself for his behaviour doesn't help him prepare for those life tasks. If anything, blaming yourself stunts his ability to figure out for himself what he's comfortable with, what decisions feel good and right to him, and what kind of person he's going to be when he grows up.

## **Create a Culture of Accountability in Your Home**

When we blame ourselves for our child's struggles, it leads to guilt and shame. Shame is a parenting paralyzer: it renders us ineffective when it comes to responding to our child. Shame makes us avoid holding our children accountable. Instead, we make excuses for him and rationalize his behaviour by saying things like, "Well, my son's mom was too hard on him when he was younger, that's why he's acting this way." Or "The reason my teen daughter misbehaves is that we got divorced when she was younger. It's not her fault."

Understand that excuses are not helpful to our children or us. Excuses encourage blaming others. If you feel guilty or ashamed for things you've done as a parent, take responsibility and move forward. By doing this, you're modelling for your child a culture of accountability.

Remember, if your child is always blaming others, he never has to change—and he probably won't.