**Helping children take responsibility**

It can be frustrating when children do not take responsibility for their actions. For the most part, children who do not accept responsibility blame others or forces beyond their control, thus making it difficult for them to admit any wrong-doing or to offer an apology. When children refuse to accept responsibility (including apologising), adults can find it difficult to know what to do to strengthen children’s skills in this area. To help children find ways to accept responsibility for their actions, this article will look at the common reasons behind responsibility avoidance as well as offer a few suggestions on how to support children to acknowledge their part in any ‘wrong-doing’.

NOTE: Wrong-doing is a generic term used here to describe behaviours that do not meet an adult’s expectations and/or go against household rules. They will differ from household to household.

***Internal and external locus of control***

Individuals tend to perceive the world in two ways. The first way describes those who attribute the idea that their actions, reactions and behaviours impact and influence events and others. Although these type of people understand that there are occurrences in the world that are beyond their individual control, they understand that they have free will and choice around the way they respond to any situation. When individuals hold themselves accountable for the part they play in a situation they are said to have an internal locus of control.

The second type of person tends to view situations in the opposite way to the first group. Instead of viewing things (regardless of their nature) as being in their control, this type of person will blame circumstances or others for the things that happen. Regardless of their choices, actions and reactions, they will hold other people or things accountable. These people are described as having an external locus of control.

Regardless of age, children (and adults) will present with either an internal or external locus of control. Determining who has an internal and who has an external locus of control is relatively easy. Internal locus of control individuals will take responsibility for their part in a problem and be quicker to apologise for any wrong-doing. On the other hand, the externally driven child will try to focus their attention elsewhere, blaming something/someone else as being the cause of the problem. They will also be less likely and/or willing to offer an apology. It is not uncommon for an externally driven child to be slow to apologise, use a tone, roll their eyes and/or mumble without giving eye contact when being made to apologise.

Interestingly, many studies have been conducted around these types of people, most of which conclude that that those with an internal locus of control are often happier, more resilient and more capable of accepting the universal truth that life isn’t always fair or easy. As such, a generalised conclusion can be drawn that if we, as adults, hope to support children to take responsibility for their actions, we must work on strengthening their internal locus of control.

***Not wanting to get in trouble***

The reasons why children may not want to take responsibility for their actions can be varied. While having an external locus of control may be one reason, not wanting to get in trouble may be another. Most children are motivated by being viewed in a positive light. They tend to dislike disappointing others, especially those they hold in high esteem. Alternatively, children tend to go a long way in denying their role in a situation if they are worried about others’ reactions.

***Deciding what needs to be done to fix the problem on children’s behalf***

Adults are usually well-meaning when it comes to deciding the course of action needed to fix a child-related problem. Examples of these well-meaning actions may include the adult telling the child to apologise, telling the child what they have to do to fix the problem, or motivate them with a punishment if they do not comply. While these approaches can yield success, fixing the problem without the child’s input determines that the child can continue avoid taking responsibility for their actions. The reason for this outcome is because children are not encouraged to internalise one’s actions and/or involvement. As such, a well-meaning, adult-led solution may make it more difficult for children to make a different decision in the future or accept the part they played. In short, it helps children with a pre-existing preference for an external locus of control to avoid changing the way they think about themselves and their actions.

When children are encouraged to think about their behaviour and identify (for themselves) the reasons behind their behaviour, they are more likely to think about their own actions and the effects they had on others. This method, of course, supports any attempts to strengthen a child’s internal locus of control and avoid attempts to blame monger or make excuses.

***Allowing children to focus on the negative***

It is inevitable that children will come across multiple situations where they are challenged. There will, of course, be some situations where they will be justified in their arguments that things are not fair and/or that someone is unfairly treating them. Despite the relevance of their argument, the fact is that the platitude that life is not fair is accurate. For this reason, there is little benefit in indulging children’s focus on things that might have upset them (regardless of how fair or unfair they were). Safety issues are obviously not included. Instead, empathising with the child’s feelings before refocusing them on what they plan to do to resolve the issue will help encourage them to think with an increased internal locus of control.

***How to shift children’s mindsets***

There are a few simple steps adults might choose to help children take responsibility for their actions. They are outlined below.

* *Connecting to how children feel about the situation*

When children argue the fact that they behaved in incorrect ways they are simply expressing a range of emotions, some of which include embarrassment, anger, feeling hard-done-by etc. When attempting to impress upon a child the impacts of their behaviour, it is often best served with an acknowledgement of how they might be feeling. For example, “you are so angry, and that’s why you did what you did.” When children believe adults understand their perspective they are usually more willing to engage in conversations about why their behaviours were not acceptable.

* *Connecting the child’s feelings and the adult’s expectation*

When children struggle to accept the role they played in a situation, it can sometimes help to acknowledge what it was that the child wanted while pairing it with the adult’s expectation/s. This suggestion can be achieved by identifying how the child felt, what they may have wanted and the adult’s expectation of them. For example, “You really wanted the toy. And even though you know hitting is not allowed in our household, you were so angry.”

* *Getting children to consider where things went wrong*

Once children’s voices, thoughts and feelings have been acknowledged, a next step might look at encouraging children to look at their part in the situation. For example, “When you hit your sister, what rule did you choose to break?” Once children have identified what rule has been broken, the way is paved to discuss alternatives to their actions as well as consequences.

NOTE: It is important that house rules are written down and explicit in order for them to be used as a guide to teach children what they are and are not meant to do.

* *Rectifying the problem*

As highlighted before, children tend to learn less about their behaviours and the free-will they exercise if adults instruct them on what to do to fix a problem. When children understand that things need to be addressed and rectified, they develop the understanding that the only way to move on is to talk about their involvement in a situation.

Children who dislike taking responsibility will need more reminders and encouragement to talk things through. Adult persistence and not letting things slide into the land of forgotten will set the stage that all problems need to be addressed and resolved.

* *Avoid allowing the focus to be diverted to others’ involvement*

Children who do not like to take responsibility for the part they play in a situation tend to spend a great deal of effort diverting the attention away from themselves and onto others/other things. Using a combination of acknowledgements and redirection usually proves effective in these situations. For example, “You really want me to know what he did to you first, but this conversation is about you.”

***The long and short of it***

Some children find it more difficult than others to accept responsibility for their actions, particularly those with an external locus of control who will attribute blame elsewhere. Being able to increase a child’s internal locus of control will help them to move closer to accepting responsibility. Helping children to accept responsibility can be achieved in various ways, but some ideas include using acknowledgements, making adult expectations explicit and clear, getting children to identify which rules have been broken, and getting children to identify the solution to the problems they are facing. Avoiding pitfalls such as children diverting blame onto others/other things is essential. Finally, it is important to recognise that an external locus of control is not the only reason why some children fail to take responsibility for their actions. Some other reasons may include not wanting to get in trouble, not wanting to look bad, and not wanting to face an adult’s emotional reaction.

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