

Saving Face: What to Do When Your Kid Screws Up

By Andrea Williams



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As parents, we'd like to think that years of teaching and guiding our little ones would result in perfectly well-behaved kids that never even color outside of the lines let alone commit some immoral or illegal act. The reality, though, is that we are tasked with raising free-thinking individuals who sometimes do things that completely shock and embarrass us.

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From the fairly innocent (like defacing a neighbor's property in a teenage prank gone wrong) to the downright heinous (orchestrating a mass school shooting), at some point parents are likely to find themselves answering for a child's mistakes. So what's the best way to respond? How can you show love and support for your child while still distancing yourself from the act in question? Read on for four steps on how to save face when your kid messes up.

Love But Don't Condone

It can be tempting to show unconditional support for a child, even when he behaves inappropriately, because, well, he's your child. But that's actually a mistake, says Dennis Poncher, founder of [Because I Love You \(B.I.L.Y.\)](http://www.bily.org/) (<http://www.bily.org/>), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting parents and helping them develop solid parenting skills with troubled or challenging children of any age. While you should certainly love your child no matter what, it is important to clearly state that you don't love or support his actions.

“I continually remind parents that there is a difference between loving your child and liking your child,” says Poncher. “We love them unconditionally, but liking comes with conditions. When a child disobeys a rule or breaks the law, they must have ownership of the consequences. I often tell a parent to step outside of the box and ask themselves how they would handle the situation if it was not their child.”

Hold Your Child Accountable

Shortly after founding B.I.L.Y., Poncher learned that his son had thrown a brick through the window of a neighbor’s house, breaking it. The neighbor promptly presented Poncher with a \$200 bill to replace the window, and Poncher quickly rejected it just as quickly. “I told this neighbor that I had no intention of paying the bill and that he needs to talk to my son since he was the culprit,” he explains.

Sarah Hamaker, a certified Leadership Parenting Coach and blogger, believes that Poncher made the right decision. “[Parents should] help the child take responsibility,” she says. “This means, don’t step in and shield the child from his actions, but step alongside the child and, depending on the age of the kid, show him what he needs to do to make it right. This should include sincere apologies, preferably both written and verbal, and an offer of restitution.”

Seek Help

Here’s the thing: Sleeping till noon a Saturday afternoon could be considered “normal” teenage behavior. Getting high after school is not. Failure to distinguish the difference—and seek appropriate behavior modification—will only hamper your child’s progress and maturity in the long run, and it will likely mean more trouble to come.

“Depending on the severity of the offense, bringing in outside authorities may be in line,” says Poncher. “Many times we [at B.I.L.Y.] suggest that a parent make an appointment with a juvenile detective and take their youth in for a reminder that their offense may result in the court system getting involved. With a parenting support network like B.I.L.Y. behind them, parents are reminded of the many case histories of other families and the sometimes disastrous results due to a parent’s refusal to deal with the issues.”

Don’t Beat Yourself Up

Coming to the realization that your child is not perfect and is capable of bad behavior is tough stuff. Even still, over-analyzing your parenting skills and blaming yourself for your child’s actions only makes matters worse.

“To continue to live in grief and self-punishment hinders everyone’s goal to find a balance between what was and now what shall be,” says parenting strategist Natalie Blais. “If a parent is consumed with beating themselves up over their child’s behavior, they are no longer available to the rest of the family. Not only do they pay over and over again for the child’s misdeed, but they are also demanding the same from their spouse and their children.”

In extreme cases, Blais encourages parents to seek professional help in getting over their guilt. “Learning to live with the event is as important as figuring out how to live beyond the event,” she adds. “When [parents] live in condemnation, they are constantly being compelled to live in a state of guilt. Parents of the offender did not commit the act themselves, nor did they at any point condone or make excuses for their child’s behavior. With the help of a counselor, they will have the support to recognize where they hold responsibility and where they must let go.”

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