

Alpine County Choose Civility Campaign

(An initiative of the Child Abuse Prevention Council and County Superintendent of Schools)



February Focus:

Don't Shift Responsibility and Blame

Have you noticed how some people not only refuse to accept responsibility when they've made a mistake, but they even shift the blame onto someone else? Although not taking responsibility for your own actions may be easier, less demanding and less painful, there is a price to pay. When you don't take responsibility for your own life, you give away your personal power. According to Joan Didion, "The willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life is the source from which self-respect springs." Dr. P.M. Forni, author of Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct says, "The powerful combination of self-respect and respect for others should make it almost impossible for us to choose incivility."

In his book, Dr. Forni gives examples of people who are at fault in different situations and how they will try to minimize their own responsibility by blaming someone else. For example, he shares a dialogue between two customers in the grocery store when one pushes another out of the way of the produce scale. The shopper who was pushed says instead of pushing her out of the way, the other shopper could have just asked her to move. The offending shopper says she didn't see her but she had, in fact purposefully pushed her away from the scale. When the shopper who was pushed points that out, the aggressive shopper blames the other by accusing her of getting up on the wrong side of the bed. The first uncivil act was, of course, pushing someone out of the way but notice the blame shifting too. Instead of a simple, "Excuse me", the follow up denial of responsibility was "I didn't see you" and then the blame shifting was "Boy, you got up on the wrong side of the bed." The more civil dialogue could have been, "Excuse me, may I squeeze past you to weigh my bag of apples?" "Oh, I'm sorry, of course." Thank you".

With deeper wrongs and hurts, it does seem easier to blame an external source rather than own one's actions. Many people blame family, friends, co-workers, spouses, the government, educators and their own parents. However, shifting blame actually hinders relationships, focuses us on negativity and stunts our personal growth. Blame traps us in the past and robs us of our energy. Letting go of blame and instead forgiving others simply means that we let go of the past and embrace the present. The Greek playwright Sophocles put it this way, "It is a painful thing to look at your own trouble and know that you yourself, and no one else has made it." One of the reasons people often have self-

esteem problems is that they don't take responsibility for their own actions. Instead, they blame someone else for all the bad things that happen and create a victim mentality. This damages relationships and hinders personal achievement. By taking responsibility for our own actions, we gain control over what happens in our lives and feel better about our accomplishments and ourselves.

So, we need to have the courage to admit when we are wrong and when we make a mistake. Then, step up and help make things right. As we've learned in the past articles, it's great to think the best. Don't assume others will think worse of you because you made a mistake. Owning up to mistakes will instead earn you respect. Consider how you contributed to the situation, what you can learn from the mistake and what you can do now to make things better. Some steps you can take to accept responsibility for your own actions include:

1. Step up and confess as soon as you realize you've made a mistake. The truth will be discovered eventually.
2. State the problem or mistake directly.
3. Don't try to shift any of the blame. Instead, you can simply state, "I'm sorry for this. How can I help fix it?"
4. Work together to solve the problem.
5. Accept the consequences.
6. Recover and move on.

When you stop placing blame on others, you are on your way to improved relationships and self-esteem. This moves us toward controlling our own destiny. You are accountable for your actions and your responses to other people's actions. Let's all choose civil actions and civil responses so we can improve our relationships with others.

Specifically with our children, we'll often hear them say, "I'm sorry, but..." and follow their apology with an excuse. What the child is actually saying is, "I'm sorry, but it was your fault." When our children make excuses and do not own their mistakes, they aren't learning how to take responsibility. Children don't want to get blamed, face a consequence or earn their parents' disapproval. We need to help our children admit when they are wrong and we can model that ourselves. Instead of a child saying, "I'm sorry but that toy was in my way" a better response would be "I was wrong to kick that toy and break it. Next time I'll move it out of my way." We can also help our children learn how to accept responsibility without shifting blame by:

1. Talking about the situation on the spot. If a child tries to say he's sorry and blame someone else, you can point that out by asking if he is actually sorry or blaming his sister, for example. Help him rephrase his apology.
2. Help the child state the more important fact that "I was wrong for calling you names. Next time I'll go for a walk" even if she didn't add the "I'm sorry" part of the equation.
3. Talk in terms of problem solving. Help even our youngest ones develop a problem solving attitude by saying things like "What's the problem?" and "Let's

- try to solve the problem this way.” Helping children see that they can solve problems at an early age makes it easier for them to work through issues later instead of defaulting to the easier way of blaming others.
4. Keep modeling civil dialogues and responses so they witness civil behaviors in their daily lives.

Children’s Books About Accepting Responsibility

Be Proud: Talking with Trees, Book 1 by Colleen Doyle Bryant is about an old tree who helps a young boy discover how to grow from his mistakes. This is great for children from 5-9 years old.

The Berenstain Bears and the Blame Game by Stan and Jan Berenstain is another book with the popular Berenstain Bears learning important life lessons for primary through intermediate grade students.

I Did It, and I Hid It! A Book About Taking Responsibility was written by Penelope Dyan to teach an important lesson about not blaming others.

Books for Adults

It’s All Your Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything by Bill Eddy can help us all understand why some people shift blame and what we can do about it.