

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Approaching Mistakes with Openness

JANLEE MARSHALL'S ROLE IN *God of Carnage*, which just ended at the Alameda Playhouse, was hilarious and poignant. JanLee, one of our elementary school drama teachers, played a mother whose son hit another child with a stick in anger, knocking out two of his teeth. The play revolves around a social situation in which two couples attempt to discuss the incident in a semi-civilized way. As more primitive feelings push their way to the forefront, combat explodes between everyone. The wild antics of the characters begin by revealing the temptations parents feel to focus blame away from their child and on to someone else. Even more ironically, the adults can't communicate in a mature way themselves.

The characters are unable to come to a common agreement about getting the boys to communicate. At school, we help children practice this ability all the time. For example, if two preschool children are having a verbal fight and one pushes the other, teachers make it clear that pushing is not allowed. However, they also encourage the children to talk out their initial problem. That's the way children learn to "own" their part in an argument without blaming their feelings or actions on the other person.

When parents criticize "other children" as causing their child's misbehavior, it's easy for young people to learn to slip out of the net of responsibility. Sometimes young children do better when they are separated from each other for periods of the day. However, we want children eventually to feel responsible for their choices regardless of who else is in the classroom or on the playground.

We all remember saying things when we were young to avoid "getting in trouble"—"He started it." "She did it first." "It's his fault." If children tell us that someone else urged them to do something or made them feel a particular way, we want to encourage them in a non-punitive way to tell us what part they played. "How wonderful that you can tell me what happened so honestly."

Admit when you are wrong. Apologize when you speak harshly or misjudge what a child has done. Make your family a safe place for everyone to admit when he or she is wrong.

Offer intense praise for being honest. We want children to be able to tell us about any transgression, now and as they get older. If we react punitively, they won't tell.

Teach siblings to negotiate. The point isn't to abolish conflict. We want children to acquire the skills to resolve arguments and come up with good solutions.

Avoid buying into blame. When your child says, "Jason did it first," you could respond, "It sounds like you want to do what Jason does. Sometimes that's fine. But if Jason breaks a rule, we can't blame him if you do it too."

Telling on other children. Younger children start learning the rules by noticing when someone else is breaking them. This process is important, especially for children, who have a harder time learning to curb their impulses. Offer praise for paying attention to rules, even if it sounds like tattling. "I'm glad you know that throwing blocks isn't okay."

Let's make talking about mistakes in an open way a priority in children's learning.

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