

How to Respond to Children's Misbehavior

Children can be exasperating. Six-year-old Sammy is like a tornado — he throws his clothing and toys in every direction. His mother has tried in vain to teach him to keep his clothes hung up in the closet and his toys in boxes where they belong. But he just can't seem to remember. One day she had had it! She lashed out: "You are a scatter brain. Why can't you remember to put things away?" Sammy's eyes filled with tears. He had never seen his mother act like that before. "Mommy, I'm sorry. I will try to do better."

Later in the day, Sammy's mother felt badly about the tongue lashing she had given him. She knew she had done wrong. "Tommy, let's have a little talk." So, she took his hand and led him into the living room and sat down on a sofa. "Sammy, I apologize for the tongue lashing I gave you this morning. Please forgive me." "That's all right, Mommy, I don't blame you. I will try to remember to pick up my things."

"When is criticism constructive and when is it destructive? Constructive criticism confines itself to pointing out how to do what has to be done, entirely omitting negative remarks about the personality of the child." Dr. Haim G. Ginott, *Between Parent and Child*, p. 51.

How should we respond then to children's misbehavior and carelessness? With kindness and firmness.

Harry, age 10, accidentally spilled a glass of orange juice on the table at breakfast time. Mother calmly said, "I see the orange juice is spilled. Harry, quick, get the sponge, wipe it up, and I will get another glass of juice for you." Harry said, as he wiped up the juice, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I will try to be more careful next time." There was no name-calling, no putdown. When things go wrong is no time for a lecture. The biggest problem with destructive criticism is the labels that we place

on children. "You are careless," or "How could you be so stupid?" Name-calling like this can severely damage a child's sense of self-worth. A better plan is to catch a child doing good and then affirm him/her. "Larry, You straightened up your room so nicely. Thank you!" When children are affirmed for good efforts they will try even harder to please you.

"And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else" (1 Thess. 5:14, 15, NIV). The home is a school where we learn these vital lessons.

But sometimes things go wrong — terribly wrong. "Matthew, please stop playing with that tea cup. You might drop it and it is very valuable." But Matthew kept right on rolling the cup on its edge. Suddenly it crashed to the floor. Matthew's mother was furious. "Go to your room and stay there," she yelled. "You can't make me," Matthew uttered under his breath. "I will show you who is boss around here," she yelled. She began wrestling with him and she fell up against a glass window and cut herself — not seriously. When Matthew saw the blood and his mother's arm, he ran outside and down the street. They didn't find him until late in the evening. Of course, the whole household was upset. No one slept well that night.

Parental rage can have serious consequences. Children in homes where parents often get extremely angry can suffer life-long negative results. If Matthew's mother had excused herself and gone to the bedroom to think and pray, she would have calmed down and been able to deal with the situation more effectively. If she had taken him by the hand and led him to the living room and sat down with him and shared her feelings, Matthew might

have learned a life-long lesson. "Matthew, that cup was very precious to me. It belonged to my grandmother. It was a family heirloom. That's why I didn't want you to play with the cup. Why didn't you stop rolling it when I asked you to? How do you feel about it now?" An approach like that could have brought about a genuine apology from Matthew. Of course, Matthew needed to suffer a consequence for his disobedience. "Matthew, as a consequence of your disobedience, we are going to charge you \$20 for the cup. We will take \$5 out of your allowance each month for four months."

Dr. Ron Taffel offers some worthwhile suggestions. He says, "Criticize the act, not the child. State what you want the child to *do*, not what you want her to stop doing. When talking to small children, get down to eye level and talk directly to them so they can see your full face. Talk kindly, but firmly. Pay attention to the tone of your voice. Remember the 'kind but firm rule' and vary your tone of voice from a demanding one to a tender one — depending on the seriousness of the situation." *McCalls*, Jan. 1993.

"Mothers, however provoking your child may be in their ignorance, do not give way to impatience. Teach them patiently and lovingly. Be firm with them. Do not let Satan control them. Discipline them only when you are under the discipline of God. . . . You should correct your children in love. Do not let them have their own way until you get angry, and then punish them. . . . To manifest passion toward an erring child is to increase the evil. It arouses the worst passions of the child and leads him to feel that you do not care for him. . . . Do not, I beg of you, correct your children in anger. . . . Be so calm, so free from anger, that they will be convinced that you love them, even though you punish them." *Child Guidance*, pp. 245, 249.