Dear Alice,

I am a parent who needs help guiding a teen. My son is an excuse maker! He never admits that he could be the cause of anything negative in his life. If he strikes out in baseball, it was the sun's fault for shining in his eyes; if he gets in trouble at school, it is ALWAYS the teacher's fault. No matter the problem, big or small, it is an excuse! We want to help him take responsibility for himself because the future can be difficult for him if he never accepts responsibility for anything. Help... what should we do for our excuse maker? He makes good grades, is popular, and is a very good kid. WE NEED HELP.

Answer

Dear Reader,

As a parent, it can be difficult and frustrating to see your child developing behaviors or patterns that you would rather not see. Of course, this is part of healthy care-giving behavior - to want your child to grow up to be a well-rounded, responsible individual. The challenge is to instill these values while also letting a kid learn some things for her/himself. No doubt, this is often hardest to balance while raising teenagers, as they discover who they are and what they want from their own lives. As you said, teenagers are learning to take responsibility.

People - children, adolescents, and adults alike - may turn to excuses when giving explanations for their actions (or inactions!) for many reasons. Take a few moments to think about how excuses, justifications, and rationalizations have played a role in your own life. No need to be embarrassed: everyone has used this tactic at some point or another. For example, excuses can:

- Be a way to protect yourself when you feel vulnerable - perhaps when you feel unsure of yourself, when you feel as if you've done something wrong, or may disappoint someone;
- Buy extra time to figure something out; or
- Get an intrusive questioner off your back.

Of course, excuses can also keep folks from uncovering the true meanings of their actions, thus creating obstacles to fulfilling their goals. As you ponder how you'd like to address your concerns with your son, think about how your own behavior may contribute to the situation. For example, is there anything you may be doing that encourages him to feel as though he needs to make excuses? Perhaps you have certain standards or consistently question WHY...
he's done something. Could your son have picked up his justification strategies from you or someone close to him (such as another family member, a friend, or a teacher)? Building an awareness of what your son may be reacting to can help you break down the situation better.

Now, onto the conversation with your son. When you sit down to talk about his behavior, remember that given his tendency, you'll want to make even more of an effort to make him feel supported. It's possible that if he feels attacked, he may dive straight into excuse-making mode. Pick a time that's quiet but casual, such as while preparing dinner or walking the dog. Try to keep this discussion between the two of you - a polite request for other family members to find something else to do during this time may be in order. You may want to practice what you plan to say or talk with a counselor or health promotion professional about the best ways to work through a potentially difficult talk. The following pointers are good to use anytime you find yourself in a challenging conversation:

- **Speak with a calm, caring tone.** If it's comfortable for both of you, try to make eye contact. Mirror his positions with yours and be aware of your own body language. For example, sit if he's sitting and try to keep your arms uncrossed.
- **Focus on your main concern.** Try to resist the temptation to throw a number of issues into the same pot, such as the cleanliness of his room, progress on homework, etc.
- **Use specific examples,** such as the ones you wrote about in your question. This will help your son understand what you're saying, rather than denying it all together.
- **Talk about your observations,** and then ask for his interpretations. For example, "Last week, when you were called in by the principal, it seemed like you thought it was the teacher's fault. I know that no situation is ever clear-cut. It seemed to me as though you felt that you had to make an excuse for what happened. What do you think?"
- **Ask open-ended questions,** such as, "What do you think was happening?"; "What do you see as the reasons for that??; and, "What was it that made you feel that way?"
- **Explain why the excuse-making worries you.** Remember to focus on the positive reasons for not making excuses, rather than the negative results you envision if he doesn't stop. You can say something like, "You are clearly so smart, and so many people enjoy spending time with you. There's no need for you to feel as if one or two mistakes could mean the end of the world. I know that you're a good kid. By taking responsibility for your actions, everyone else will have a chance to know it, too."
- **Provide a related example from your own life,** especially one from when you were a teenager, or even an event or interaction that happened recently. This will show him that you can relate to how he feels.
- **Clarify the difference between reasons and excuses.** See if you can help him understand that sometimes people have very valid reasons for things happening the way they do and other times they just use a plausible excuse as a way of deferring.

This discussion can be an opportunity to try out new patterns of communication between you and your son. Together, the two of you can help him come to terms with the role his actions have in his life’s course. This may seem tough, and you may feel reluctant to face the ways in which you may have influenced the patterns that your son has developed, but it is possible. You might just have to bite the bullet this time... so watch out for those excuses.

Alice!
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