

The Dreaded Call: Your Child's in Trouble

If you're in trouble at school, your parents probably already know about it! —Rachel, age 12

No parent wants to hear that their child has gotten into trouble, whether it's at school, daycare, a friend's house, or in the neighborhood. But when it does happen, you can handle the problem in a way that acknowledges the seriousness of the event, allows your child to learn important lessons, and yet also minimizes stress.

Try it...

For all parents

Kids *will* get into trouble. Look for ways to use the incident as a “teachable moment.” Talk to—but don't yell at—your child about what happened and why, and look for ways to avoid the problem in the future.

Share your parenting experiences with other parents. You may be surprised to find out you are not the only parent going through a tough time. And hard as it may be, try not to blame yourself for your child's choices.

While the tips that follow deal with low-level trouble that eventually blows over, what should you do if your child gets into *big* trouble? Sometimes kids end up in serious situations that require outside intervention or involvement in the legal system. If that's the case, talk to your child's teacher, school counselor, social worker, or a therapist. Help is available, so seek it out—don't wait!

For parents with children ages birth to 5

Children sometimes misbehave in order to get parents' undivided attention. Fatigue, hunger, illness, and loneliness often drive misbehavior. A calm response that addresses the need, a gentle reprimand, or a change of activity may be just the solution.

If your child misbehaves in someone else's care, ask the adult in charge how the situation was handled. If you don't like what you hear, engage her or him (out of earshot of your child) in a conversation about how you would prefer future situations to be handled.

Look for constructive ways to correct misbehavior, and reward your child's subsequent positive responses.

Remember that very young children are learning to control their impulses, test limits of acceptable behavior, and negotiate relationships. These skills take many years to fully develop.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

Remember that the stronger your support relationships are—with your child’s teachers, coaches, friends’ parents, and neighbors—the easier it will be to respond reasonably, rather than impulsively and defensively, to “trouble.”

It can be embarrassing or humiliating for a child to be disciplined by someone other than a parent, especially if the reprimand is given in public. If your child’s distress over the consequences seems out of proportion to the misdeed, acknowledge her feelings, and allow her additional time to process the event. Advocate for your child if you feel that discipline was inappropriately handled.

Kids this age are continuing to learn that their actions have consequences (and they will continue to learn this for some time to come). Your consistent, clear expectations for them are more powerful teaching tools than shouting at high volume.

If your child understands that you will consistently respond to misbehavior with a thoughtful discussion and temporary restrictions (for instance, no TV or computer games or a time-out in a quiet place), he or she will begin to connect actions with consequences.

Peer pressure begins to be a powerful motivator at this age and becomes more so as your child matures. Find out if peer pressure played a part in the misbehavior. If so, talk about the importance of thinking for oneself. Help your child reflect on what she was thinking and encourage her to believe in the value of her own good choices.

Some children misbehave away from home to engage their parent’s attention. Resist the urge to react severely. Instead, ensure that appropriate consequences are enforced (either by you or someone else). Pay attention, however, to whether your child is getting enough positive adult attention. Provide your full attention as best you can, even if it means putting your own agenda on the back burner.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

Negotiate rules and consequences with your child for missed curfews, underage drinking, cheating, and so on before the situations arise. Then consistently enforce the rules you’ve both agreed upon.

Role-play conversations with your child that will help her or him make good choices and resist negative peer influence. You may have to help your child find new friends, minimize opportunities for contact with some, and exercise greater parental oversight when your child and another child are together so that you can be a positive influence in their relationship.

If you get the “dreaded call”—from the parents of your child’s friend, a store manager, a teacher, or neighbor—just keep in mind that it doesn’t mean you have a bad kid. Regardless of your initial reaction, do whatever works to calm yourself *before* dealing with your child, whether that means taking a brisk walk, screaming in private, or calling a friend to talk.

It often helps to wait before jumping into disciplinary action or a full discussion about why the trouble occurred. It might be more productive to say “Let’s both think about this and talk after

dinner,” since you will both gain some distance from the incident.

Your reaction to the adult in charge when the problem occurred will teach your child another part of the “getting in trouble” lesson. Be sure to listen to both sides of the story before drawing any conclusions about what happened. Refrain from assessing blame or questioning someone else’s authority in front of your child. It’s often useful to set up a time to talk when everyone is calmer.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

Remember to review your expectations, rules, and consequences with teenagers at least annually. Some families write up the house rules, which everyone signs.

Peer pressure continues to be strong at this age. Find out if it played a part in the situation, and strategize how to minimize it in the future. Be aware that telling your teen she can’t hang out with someone is probably not going to work. Enlisting the help of another adult close to the situation might be helpful.

It is almost always a good idea to allow natural consequences to play out in the situation. Resist the urge to minimize or lessen a penalty resulting from your child’s behavior.

Be available and supportive, but let your child be the one to follow up on after-the-fact requirements and actions (returning phone calls to authorities or rearranging work schedules for disciplinary appointments).

Be honest about the negative consequences your own similar past actions, if any, have had on your life.

Don’t overreact to bad news. Delay your response until you have had time to think clearly. You might write down what you hear, and brainstorm with your child a list of responses you both you can make to the situation.

Don’t let your child’s missteps define him or her. Especially at times like this, it’s important to recite to yourself all the positive qualities your child has, so that you both have hope for the future.

[Dig deeper](#). Visit MVParents.com for in-depth information on how to strengthen your family and tackle tough issues. Click on “Parenting Matters.”

[Tell a friend](#) about MVParents.com. Its positive approach to parenting is based on the 40 Developmental Assets that children and youth need to help them grow up healthy and avoid high-risk behaviors such as underage drinking. Learn more about the [assets](#), the research behind them, and how you can build them with your child or teenager.

