

When Your Child Cheats, Take a Parental Time Out

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Learning that your child cheated may make you see red. However, calming down and slowly finding out why your child felt the need to cheat yields a better outcome, our experts say.

by Kathy Shiels Tully

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It's a phone call parents never want, or expect, to get: Your "perfect" child has been caught cheating on a test.

You might want to yell, scream, even cry from frustration and disappointment. How could this have happened? What was that kid thinking?

What experts say parents should do—which may feel like the antithesis of any parent's natural response—is to take a parental "time out" before overreacting to the incident with their child.

"Parents need to take a time out for themselves to view their reaction," says [Jeremy Schneider](#), a New York-based therapist, blogger, and syndicated columnist who specializes in parenting and relationships. "Otherwise, we go off on [the child] because we're embarrassed, angry, whatever, and end up adding fuel to a fire that might not be there."

Think about the situation first, he advises. Is your daughter typically a good student? Has she always done well? Could she be feeling pressure from other things besides studying that take time, like sports, drama club, or other after-school activities and commitments?

If that's the case, then look at her schedule, Schneider says. "There could be time-management issues that she needs help thinking through. There's so much pressure [for teens] to succeed at such an early age now, vs. getting the skills they need—mentally and emotionally—to succeed in life."

Another factor is that kids want their parents to be proud of them. "They feel an added pressure to prove us right," Schneider says. "And when they aren't able to, they want to save us from that experience [of them not doing well], but sometimes without thinking through the consequences."

"It's hard to remember how our kids view us," he adds. "Not as people, but as all-powerful beings. A sense of desperation to avoid [letting parents down] can lead to cheating."

The good news, Schneider says, is that cheating is not your son's new way of life. "It was simply—and incorrectly—his strategy for dealing with a situation at the time, of being unprepared, of not having enough time to study, etc.," he says.

Schneider suggests that parents use the cheating incident as a springboard to help their child develop her time-management muscle. Sit down with your teen and talk about the following:

- What were the triggers that got her to feel that cheating was her only option? If it was being overwhelmed with activities, for example, then before she gets involved with another activity, have a conversation about her available time.
- How much time does she think she needs for studying?
- How hard would it be to drop the activity, if needed?
- Does the family need to skip going out to dinner if eating a quick meal at home will give her extra time needed to study for an upcoming test or project?

As a parent, you want to help your child. And you can, Schneider says, by "taking some weight and pressure off so there's extra time for studying."

Teens Feel Under Constant Stress Today

[Jamie Shannon](#), a teacher at Bellingham (Wash.) High School, also serves as a life coach for teens. She sees firsthand the pressure on students.

“Cheating has become an epidemic among high school students because the stakes are unimaginably high,” Shannon says. “It used to be that cheating was something that the lazy kids did; now it is the opposite. High-achieving students with 4.0 grade-point averages cheat because they feel as though they have everything to lose.”

The surprising thing, she notes, is that most teens operate under constant stress and have become so adapted to it that they believe it's normal. Citing a [2009 article published in the journal *Educational Leadership*](#), Shannon says, “Seventy percent of students report that they often or almost always feel stressed by their schoolwork. Forty-four percent of students report physical symptoms of stress.”

So how do these experts suggest that parents help their child self-correct, reduce their stress, and recover from a cheating incident? Following are four guidelines:

1. Cheating can feel like a direct reflection on us as parents, Schneider says. “Don’t take it personally,” he counsels. “Try to stay focused on what’s best for your child.”
2. Have a conversation. Aim for understanding how your child came to believe that cheating was the best option he had and what contributed to his decision to cheat.
3. Check your emotions. You want to aim for an open environment, Schneider says, so that he can discuss what happened at this time—and at other times in the future should it happen again—without worrying about your potential anger or embarrassment.
4. Keep the conversation open. Keep checking in with your child to see whether any of the reasons he cheated, such as being overscheduled, are beginning to build up again.

Students Aren’t the Only Ones Who Cheat

The confidence parents express in their child will go a long way, but the results will be longer-lasting if the child begins to feel that confidence himself.

And this doesn’t apply exclusively to students. High-powered athletes are often caught cheating or taking inappropriate shortcuts. Garret Kramer, founder and managing partner of Inner Sports and author of [Stillpower: The Inner Source of Athletic Excellence](#), provides consulting and crisis management to hundreds of athletes and coaches in those situations, from well-known professionals, Olympians, and teams to high school and collegiate players across a multitude of sports. “When an athlete, or a student, stumbles,” he says, “it’s a learning moment, pushing us [as parents] in the right direction.”

“We humans exist in a continuum of moods,” Kramer continues, explaining, “sometimes we’re in the penthouse, sometimes we’re in the basement.” Using the metaphor of our moods constantly traveling up and down like an elevator, he says, “Not acting from the ‘low place’ is what will get you out.” It’s exactly this situation—feeling trapped in the low place or the basement, as Kramer calls it, that resulted in your child cheating in the first place.

“The reason kids cheat is because, in the moment, they feel they’re in an unsafe place. From that place, everything is distorted,” he says. What children who cheat don’t realize, Kramer says, is that when they’re in an insecure place emotionally, they’re not thinking clearly.

As with Schneider and Shannon, Kramer agrees that when parents first learn that their child has been caught cheating, they must first and foremost take a deep breath, then try to empathize with the mindset their child was in to have cheated in the first place.

“It’s a matter not of what you do, but [of your] understanding,” Kramer says. Instead of forcing a fix or choosing a swift, punitive consequence, he says, “Recognize that [your child] had to be feeling tremendous insecurity about her performance on the test—and also about your reaction.”

Freelance writer Kathy Shiels Tully and her husband live with their two daughters north of Boston.