

“What was that noise?” I asked, attempting to keep the worry from my voice, yet knowing by the guilt-ridden look on my eight-year-old’s face as he peeked around the corner that it wasn’t good.

“I didn’t mean to! It was an accident!” he proclaimed in a dread-tinged tone. In his hands were several pieces of what used to be his older sister’s prized three-foot-tall dance trophy. “I was practicing my soccer moves in the hallway, and I accidentally kicked the ball into her room and right into her trophy. Can you fix it, Mom? Or can we hide the broken pieces so she will never know?”

My son was right to fear his sister’s reaction. She practiced fiercely last year to win that impressive trophy. Several options floated through my head. I could help minimize the damage and superglue the pieces back together so that my daughter would likely never know. But, how would that help my son become more responsible? It wouldn’t.

My son had made a poor decision, and he is likely to make many more in his developing years. After all, mistakes are a critical part of learning. This was an opportunity to teach a responsible decision-making skill and have my son fix what he had broken, and that “fixing” applied to relationships, feelings, and an object.

“How do you think you can make this right with your sister?” I asked. I sat back, encouraging and prompting rather than telling him what he should do. He came up with a plan to tell his sister of his mistake, apologize, and work with his dad to super glue the pieces back together this weekend instead of going to a slumber party. These are the roots of responsibility. This is what it takes to parent in an intentional way that develops social and emotional skills within children – tools that lead to success in many aspects of their lives.

Parents and those in a parenting role know their children need to learn to collaborate, increase resiliency, and manage their feelings to reach their goals. Across the nation, schools are prioritizing social and emotional skills. From pre-K through college, skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making are recognized as the most critical skills for achievement in academics and future partnerships at work and at home. Knowing what our children are working on at each age and stage helps us understand their development, empathize with their challenges, and raise confident and responsible people.

0-5-Year-Olds: *Develop a feelings vocabulary.* Talking about the bodily symptoms your child might experience raises their self-awareness. “Does your face get hot and red when you are angry? Does your heart beat fast?” Practice naming feelings when they occur. “It looks like you are frustrated because your sister took your toy, is that right?” Always check to see if the feeling label you offered is accurate.

6-7-Year-Olds: *Practice coping strategies.* Help children cope with stressors by coming up with ideas for calming down. Talk about and make a list. “What can we do when we are feeling anxious and tired?” Start by offering a few suggestions like hugging a stuffed animal or practicing calm breathing. Then allow your child to come up with ideas as well. Post the list and keep it handy.

8-10-Year-Olds: *Collaborate on household responsibilities.* A whole new level of social awareness is happening as this age group’s sensitivity to fairness and social issues grows. You can build on these emerging themes by reinforcing household responsibilities and discussing how as a family you care for your home together. List ways your child can contribute with competence; be sure to model and work closely with them the first few times to ensure they understand. The satisfaction of completing a task during family work time helps them feel that they are contributing.

9-11-Year-Olds: **Exercise relationship skills through problem-solving dialogue.** Peer interactions and friendship challenges increasingly affect this age. This is the perfect time to strengthen your child's problem-solving ability and relationship skills. In coaching your child, trust they can find a good solution to a problem with some careful consideration. Rather than intervening, you can prompt your child's thinking and help them consider how they can approach their relationship challenges. When children are successful with their own ideas, they learn they can competently manage their own relationships.

12-14-Year-Olds: **Practice responsible decision-making skills.** In the early teen years, connections between cause and effect are just beginning. Teens undergo major brain reconstruction shifting from learning through play to more logical thinking. Simple conversations to help teens link action and consequence and formulate their own sense of right and wrong lead them to more responsible thinking and decision making.

Find more at [ParentingMontana.org](https://www.ParentingMontana.org).

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