

## Summary

*Most times, when there is a disagreement between individuals there will be some fault. The hallmark of being an adult is that you own the things you did wrong. This essay traces a real issue I had with a student who took no responsibility for his actions and how, through the use of the concept of 'locus of control' I had some success at making a small change.*

### Who is in Control – You or Billy?

An adult is a rare individual; that is if you take my definition. For me an adult is someone who takes responsibility for their behaviour. If a teacher does nothing more than encourage this in their students they can consider themselves successful.

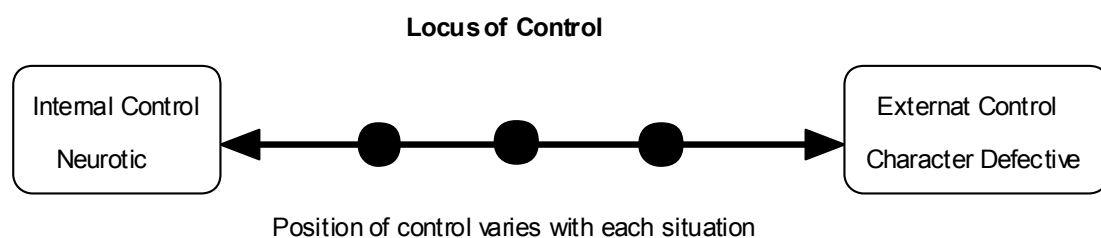
Billy is a large, aggressive student who, at some level successfully navigates his way through life. His argumentative style and demeanour that threatens aggression means that most in his life find it very difficult to hold him responsible for the inappropriate things he does around the school.

As a teacher you will be familiar with the following typical 'Billy excuses':

- My uniforms in the wash .....
- The computer wouldn't print .....
- Mum promise to get it for me but she forgot .....
- I only did it because .....
- She started it .....
- **IT'S NOT MY FAULT!**

The list is endless and some excuses have become urban myths (the dog ate my homework) however, this refusal to own actions is a frustration when you are trying to modify children's behaviour. While ever they believe 'it's not their fault' there is no reason to change, no reason to take responsibility, no reason to take control.

Psychologists have devised instruments, questionnaires that can measure a person's control levels. They call this our Locus of Control. On a scale that goes from completely externally controlled we move to the other extreme where people are totally internally controlled.



Scott Peck, the famous psychiatrist describes people who are internally control as being neurotic. These are people who are the direct opposite to character defective people, the

term used by Peck to describe those who are externally controlled. Neurotic people take on unrealistic responsibilities. For example, if a neurotic person organises a barbeque and it rains, it rained because it was their barbeque. The implication is that they control the weather; they should be employed in drought relief.

The reality is you have no immediate control of the immediate outside environment. Some things will happen to you that are not your fault. Life's like that. Conversely there will be things that happen that are a direct result of your behaviour. The adult response is to honestly assess where your responsibility lies on the continuum and respond accordingly. The adult response is to act in a way that gives you the best chance to get what you want in the long run.

So where does Billy fit on the Locus of Control line? Well an example of Billy's view of control can be given from the following event I witnessed the other day. Billy had drawn attention to himself because the teacher has taken his car magazine from another student. His outbursts included:

- "You can't take that it's mine"
- "I need it back because it's my brothers"
- "You always pick on me"
- You're not fair I wasn't reading it "

Obviously he operates in an external control, character defective manner. As principal I overheard the outbreak and was drawn into the confrontation. Once Billy starts he just keeps going. His behaviour reminds me of a cartoon scene where a group of characters are madly digging for gold. After some frantic digging one realises they have gone so deep they can't get out. The classic comedy is his partner stands tall and, with great confidence declares "I know we'll dig our way out" and they continue to dig. Billy just keeps on digging a hole for himself when he gets on a roll. The fact is eventually the teacher (read parent, friend, etc.) gives up and Billy survives. But he doesn't learn.

Well in the incident mentioned Billy continued to blame others and as I had become more closely involved my credibility was on the line.

A good bit of advice I got early in my career was to move slowly with caution, so I directed him to my office. This was after I had been drawn into his style of fighting. I had pointed out he was out of uniform. Not his fault of course. Why did I bother?

On the way to the office I had time to think. I didn't want to get involved in another blame session, I had to get him to take the responsibility for his behaviour and the teacher needed to know she was supported.

The truth never hurts as much as you think it might so I took Billy into the office.

"This is the deal" I said. "I will talk and you will listen. Then you will talk and I will listen. Then I will talk about what you said and then you can talk about what I said. If I think you're not listening or not being honest you can sit outside my office until you are prepared to do this".

I then explained to Billy the theory of external and internal control. I drew a line and pointed out that in every situation the control is different. Sometimes it is the others fault and sometimes it's your fault and sometimes it's just life. The thing is the only thing anyone can control is their own behaviour. I told Billy while ever he blamed others he really was not being responsible for his own life. I was really pleased with the way I explained the situation and thought I had got through. I thought I was brilliant.

Billy started as if everything I had said was just time filler'. 'It's like this, I gave the magazine to Andy and he just had it on the desk and Miss just took it for no reason". These words and words like them continued through Billy's allotted time. My brilliance had been wasted a lost compounded by its rarity.

I asked him to tell me what he thought I had said and it was clear he didn't know, or wasn't interested. So I evoked the time out clause and told him to sit outside until he would seriously listen. I repeated the process a couple more times and eventually he could tell me what I was on about. He could finally see the behaviour he was displaying.

Then the deputy saw Billy in my office and took the opportunity to follow-up a complaint he had received from a teacher about Billy's behaviour. The response was classic Billy "It wasn't my fault"! But there was a difference. When he saw me out of the corner of his eye he couldn't suppress his grin. At least he now recognised his behaviour. This has to be to first step in the process of becoming an adult.

As a footnote: At school the neurotics don't cause you much trouble. It's so much easier to convince someone it's not their responsibility than to get them to take ownership of what is.