

9 Tips for Teaching Kids Responsibility

Expert advice for raising responsible children.

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Your best friend has a teenager who scrapes ice off the car windshield without being asked. Your cousin has a one-year-old that puts her bottle in the sink when she finishes the milk, no reminders needed. Where did all of these wonder children come from?

"Ingraining responsibility in children is not a trick, but is simply teaching them life skills," says Karen Ruskin, Psy.D., author of "The 9 Key Techniques for Raising Respectful Children Who Make Responsible Choices." "Kids who do not have responsibilities feel entitled and think the world will always do for them."

And responsibility isn't just completing a task. "It's also about an attitude, the idea of taking action and being proud of doing it, not just always having your mom and dad do it for you," says Alex Barzvi, Ph.D., co-host of the talk show "About Our Kids" on Sirius Doctor Radio.

Raising helpful, good kids who know how to make a sandwich is not a fantasy! We asked our experts for easy ways to incorporate responsibility into your child's life.

1. **Start Young**

You can't suddenly spring responsibility on a teenager and expect he will know how to follow through. Imagine your high school daughter calling you at work with the complaint: "Mom I'm hungry. When are you coming home?" You say: Make a sandwich! She replies: "I'll just wait for you." Handing out responsibility to kids needs to start early. Think: toddler.

2. **Let Them Help You**

Don't grumble and mope when it's time to do housework. Smile and invite your son to help (even if he makes the job take longer). It's team work, precious time with your child and a lesson that will one day send him off into the world with the ability to sort lights and darks!

"When your child is invited to participate, he feels valued," says Dr. Ruskin. "He will take these good feelings and learn to take ownership of his home and feel pride in maintaining it."

3. **Show Kids the Way**

Play to a child's skill level, suggest both experts. First, you can demonstrate how to complete small tasks. If your son wants a snack, show him where the apples are and how to wash one off. Does your daughter always throw her dirty clothes on the floor? Place a hamper in her room and show her where the day-old jeans belong.

Make responsibilities age-appropriate and even use the word "responsibility," says Dr. Barzvi, when informing your son about the tasks you expect him to complete on his own. It sounds grown-up and important!

4. **Model Responsibility**

And talk about it. Banish a tableful of dirty breakfast dishes with the line: "Now we put our plate in the sink," as the meal ends. Use the same inclusive "we" phrases over and over to show how you can easily solve problems. Ask other family members and your nanny to follow suit. You'll be surprised how quickly these actions become a habit for kids.

5. **Praise Them**

Kids love to help. They want to help. To them, chores don't feel like work. Keep up positive vibes by offering specific praises for actions. "You hung your coat on the hook and I'm proud of you!" Or, "Thank you for emptying the garbage in your room!"

Children will develop a sense of ownership for any repeated action. And this constant communication helps them take initiative in other situations, says Dr. Barzvi, such as at school or on a play date.

6. **Manage Your Expectations**

When you ask a five-year-old to make her bed, it may still be lopsided. Don't criticize. Recognize a job well done. The next time you make your own bed, show her how you do it.

7. **Avoid Rewards**

At least at first. There's a time and place for rewards and allowances, but both experts agree that being responsible isn't it. Don't assume a reward system has to be in place for your child to learn responsibility. While a reward chart can be effective for some kids, others respond just as well to praise, spending time with you and feeling the boost in their self-confidence. Save rewards for tasks that go above and beyond what you expect to be your child's normal household responsibilities.

8. **Provide Structure and Routine**

Kids thrive on order. Instead of offering rewards to get them to meet responsibilities, set up a morning routine with a positive end result. Your son must brush his teeth, eat breakfast and get dressed before watching TV. (Notice TV is not being offered as a reward -- it's just the result of finishing the routine.) And he should be able to complete the routine in any order that works for him.

A younger child may not fully realize these tasks are his responsibilities, but allowing him to create a healthy structure will give him the tools to one day develop strategies for getting homework done without you nagging (too much!), suggests Ruskin.

Set up a school night routine with our printable checklist for preschoolers and checklist for elementary-aged kids.

9. **Teach Consequences**

Learning to take care of his things also helps a child develop a sense of responsibility for his actions. To get your son to clean up after an art project, inform him that he won't be able to play with his crayons and scissors until the next day if he leaves a messy table. Then you need to follow through and take away his supplies if he shirks his responsibility. The more you enforce the rules, the more likely he is to clean up without being asked -- or at least without whining about it too much.

"It is ultimately your child's choice to not put a toy away," says Dr. Barzvi. "Parents

are afraid to let kids suffer, be sad or angry, but if we always solve children's problems, they will not learn to be responsible as they grow up."

If your daughter has to pack her bag for school each day and forgets her basketball sneakers, then she won't get to practice that afternoon. As much as you want to bring her sneakers to her, don't! Hopefully she'll be more cognizant of remembering her responsibilities next time.

Teaching kids about responsibility isn't easy -- but what part of parenting is? It can take years and lots of practice. But if you follow these tips, you stand a better chance of raising a responsible child who then grows into a responsible adult.