

Raising Responsible Children

How can parents raise responsible children — children who can keep themselves out of danger and say "no" to alcohol, drugs and sex?

The best solution is an old-fashioned one that may, at first, seem improbable: household chores. Chores top the list of most of the experts interviewed for this story.

They had other recommendations as well, of course. Parents should be responsible and set a good example. They must also make clear their expectations for responsible behavior. And, though it can be difficult, they have to let their children suffer the consequences of their own mistakes and learn from those mistakes rather than bail them out (unless it's dangerous not to). They shouldn't, for example, rush to school with children's homework if they forget it.

Parents also need to monitor their children's use of the media. (See our earlier story on media.) And it helps if parents can build a community of like-minded friends for themselves and their families. Finally, since teens are hard-wired to take risks, parents should try to give them positive risk-taking options.

Why Chores Work

Still, say the experts, chores are key in raising responsible children. But how can making beds and clearing the table help breed a child who will say "no" to drugs, sex and alcohol?

Marty Rossman, associate professor of family education at the University of Minnesota, finds that the best predictor of a child's success — defined as not using drugs, quality relationships, finishing education and getting started in a career — is that they began helping with chores at age three or four. The study found that it was important to start young.

Rossman is just completing an analysis of data from a study that followed 84 people from childhood into their 20s.

While there are no guarantees, chores are the core of a strategy that makes children active members of a family that builds bonds by working together, helping children develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and improving communication. The chores have to be part of a family endeavor with everyone involved. In other words, if you think you can lie on the couch, television remote in hand, while the kids rake the leaves, forget it. Children also have to be involved in the decision-making process, determining what work needs to be done and when it needs to be done.

The Earlier the Better

The younger they start, the better, say the experts. And that means 2- and 3-year olds can be expected, for example, to put away toys, albeit with some help. If a toddler wants to help sweep with a baby broom, by all means let him or her help. If you're starting with older children, you've got to add tasks incrementally. Otherwise kids will do chores only as long as you're willing to browbeat them into doing them.

The strategy of giving children family responsibilities works because it gives them a sense of belonging to a team and being a contributing member of that team.

Children, especially older ones, desperately want to belong to a group and chores make them an active part of an important one: their family. Chores also build a sense of confidence and competence, traits that help them resist peer group pressure.

Chores are also a way of giving children some leeway within a broader framework that lets them practice making decisions and planning a schedule. Ideally, they learn that making decisions requires a bit of thought.

"When there's a choice to be made, pause, check your gut feeling and follow your gut," is the lesson kids need to learn, says Mimi Doe, founder of SpiritualParenting.com and author of *10 Principles For Spiritual Parenting and Busy But Balanced*.

All this makes for a child who functions better in the world, according to Rossman, the University of Minnesota professor.

Of course, anyone who has ever asked any child to do anything knows about the inevitable complaints and battles that can follow. Children's complaints are valid. You've got to listen to them. That gives a child a sense that they can disagree — recognition of their complaints validates their opinions and can help equip them for disagreeing with their peers. They still have to do the work that's expected of them but may negotiate for different tasks next week or doing them according to a schedule they set.

It requires planning on parents' parts. Telling kids to do one thing and then following that task with another and then another just makes them feel put upon. You've got to be organized and reasonable in assigning chores.

Having children do chores also does not mean they get done faster. But parents have to remember that it's not just about getting the job done fast, it's about doing things as a family and teaching kids lessons that will serve them well in the future.

"Parents want to get home and just get through the jobs themselves and don't include them in making dinner or sorting laundry," says Keyser. "We miss out. Parents should stop and think, this is my time with my child, what do I want to pass on? It's not only how to make rice or sort laundry but also it's a relationship to work on." The question of allowances accompanies chores and, while children can be paid for some chores, chores should not be tied to pay. The reason? Everyone in the family pitches in to help. Mom and dad don't get paid for making dinner or doing laundry; kids don't get paid for doing what's their fare share.

When Keyser talks to children who do chores, she doesn't hear complaints. She hears children who are proud about what they can do.

Choosing Not to Drink

Fifteen-year-old Jake Alexander and his younger brother and sister live with their dad in the East Bay area near San Francisco. They have plenty of chores to do around the house — folding laundry, cleaning, vacuuming, setting and clearing the dinner table, doing dishes, taking care of the dog and similar tasks.

Jake has far more responsibilities than his friends — who often find themselves drafted to help out when they're at his house.

"They kind of complain because my dad has them do a little work, too. There's always work to do around here," says Jake. "It's good for me because I'm learning how to take responsibility and do all this and it's kind of bad for them because they're used to having their parents do everything for them."

Jake is at an age when he sees some of his peers using alcohol and drugs.

"I've made the choice not to drink at all," he says. He's had the occasional invitation — and turns it down. "If I did it right now, I'd regret it later," he says.

Chores have strengthened the family's bonds, says Jake. The family dishwasher broke, forcing the family to temporarily do the dishes by hand. "At first it was, 'Oh, man, it's just more work because there's a whole bunch of dishes to wash.' And after a while it got to be fun," Jake says. "It just got to a point where we could laugh and tell jokes and talk about stuff that we needed to talk about that we didn't have time to talk about."

Tips for Raising Responsible Children

Here are some experts' tips for raising responsible children:

As children get older, parents need to realize that teens are hard-wired to take risks, says Stephen Wallace, chairman of SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions/Students Against Drunk Driving). But these risks don't need to involve alcohol, drugs or unsafe sex — although Wallace says many parents consider that inevitable. He calls that the "myth of inevitability." He sees opportunities for positive risk taking. He's still researching this, but sees anecdotal evidence that activities beyond the normal menu are most effective. Some of his examples: helping to build a library for children in Zimbabwe, mountain climbing, starting a community program for the homeless or getting involved in a project working with the elderly.

You don't have to do it alone, says James Morris, past president of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (www.aamft.org) and assistant professor of marriage and the family at Texas Tech University. He considers the idea of two parents (or often even one) raising children alone is actually new and relatively unnatural. Anthropologically speaking, clans or extended families raised children, he says. So parents need to create their own little village for their children. That could be church or synagogue or an informal group of like-minded families. At the very least, it means knowing your kids' friends and meeting their parents.

Be clear with children about what you expect from them. "So often we assume that our kids will absorb or somehow know the right choices," says Doe, when in reality, parents haven't been specific enough. A family should have a philosophy of how it does things

as a team to give children a framework for their lives. Then, within that overarching framework, parents have to make it clear that they're responsible for their chores, remembering their lunch or their homework. And if a child forgets, let them feel the consequences, she says.

Having kids help with chores makes great sense on paper but is often accompanied by such time-consuming resistance that parents end up doing it themselves. Tackle it in increments. Give kids a chore list to check off (try www.listorganizer.com for sample lists). Start small with younger kids; add responsibilities as they get older. Or, if you're just introducing them to older kids, add them incrementally. Most parents underestimate children's capability to do chores.

Give them tools. Set a time for cleaning rooms. Making beds is easier if the child simply pulls up a duvet. Deconstruct tasks. Children get just as overwhelmed by tasks as adults. A pile of toys can look overwhelming so help by giving them one toy and reminding them where it goes, start with the next, and so on. Trade off. Tell a child you'll put away their toys if he or she will bring you the baby's diaper bag so you can go out.

You've got to walk the walk yourself. "My philosophy has always been to teach by example," says Peter Alexander, Jake's dad. He believes in accepting your responsibilities, being honest and working hard, tries to do that himself and believes his kids share his values. Doe suggests parents look in the mirror. If you've committed to work on a committee, do you go to meetings or cancel at the last minute because you're tired? If your child wants to take class that requires attendance five Saturdays in a row, do you allow her to stay home when her interest flags or require her to stick it out? (Doe notes that sometimes, a child will have conflicts — say, attending a club meeting or finishing studying for a major test — and cancellations have to be made, but those are exceptions that parents and children can make after careful evaluation.)