

Raising Responsible Kids

“It is easy to dodge our responsibilities, but we cannot dodge the consequences of dodging our responsibilities.”—Josiah Charles Stamp, English economist

You want your child to clean her room, but it’s a disaster. You ask your child to put his clothes into the hamper, but instead they’re strewn all over his room. How can you get your child to take responsibility when he or she refuses to accept it?

Tips for all parents...

- **Know that teaching kids responsibility takes a long time.** Don’t expect sudden miracles. Continue to talk and teach about responsibility as your child grows.
- **Make sure your child feels the consequences of not taking responsibility** (instead of you feeling the consequences). For example, if your child refuses to place his clothes in the hamper to be washed, leave them on the floor of his room. Shut the door. Don’t wash the clothes. When your child panics about not having clean clothes, show him the way to the washer and dryer.
- **Resist the temptation to rescue your kids when they suffer the consequences of not taking responsibility.** If your teenager calls from the library in the middle of winter wanting a ride home because she’s cold and she didn’t wear a coat, empathize with her situation, but don’t bail her out (unless, of course, it could be a life threatening situation). Something as simple as a walk in cold, brisk weather can teach a child the benefits of wearing a coat in the winter.
- **Talk less.** Kids often refuse to take responsibility because they know their parents will keep reminding them to do so. Be clear that you’ll give reminder, and then it’s up to them.
- **Lead by example.** Remember that lessons in responsibility always start with you! If your child hears you saying one thing and then doing the opposite, your kids will be more likely to follow your example rather than follow your command.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- **Break responsibilities into small, easy-to-do tasks that are age appropriate for young children.** For example, keep a laundry basket or bucket handy for your child to place his or her toys in when picking them up off the floor.
- **Be responsible together.** For example, everyone in the family can help to set the table. You can set the dishes, glasses, and breakable items, while your child places a napkin next to each plate. Older preschoolers can learn how to place knives, forks, and spoons.
- **Monitor young children when they're practicing responsibility.** You can help to keep them on task and keep them focused from distractions.

For parents with children ages 6–9

- **Consider having time-frames for responsibilities.** For example, maybe you say that kids can't watch TV until they've picked up their room or completed their homework first. They're more likely to get their responsibilities done if they know they get to do something that they really want to do afterward.
- **Let kids be kids, but also expect them to take responsibility for their age.** It can be a tricky balance, but there is a balance between too many and no responsibilities.
- **Talk about how important responsibilities are.** For example, ask your kids: "If I didn't take the responsibility of cooking dinner, what would happen? What if someone didn't take out the garbage for a month?"

For parents with children ages 10–15

- **Focus on kids actions—not their reactions—to responsibility.** Some will complain every step of the way, but will finish their responsibilities, while others will say, "I'm getting to it" but never complete the task at hand.
- **If you're wary of the tension in your home around trying to get your teenager to take responsibility,** take a time out and take some time for yourself.
- **Consider having a "family responsibility time"** where everyone needs to be home to

complete his or her responsibilities. Some families find that Saturday mornings are a good time. Don't allow anyone to leave until all the responsibilities are done—and done well.

- **Slowly increase your child's responsibilities as he or she ages.** Many kids at this age can begin to mow lawns, baby sit, and perform other responsibilities. Teach them how to handle responsibilities well, monitor them, and let them gradually master their skills.

For parents with children ages 16–18

- **Monitor your teen's stance on responsibility.** Some teenagers become overly responsible and rarely make time to relax and have fun, while others run at the mention of the word. Share your observations with your teenager, and help them to develop a more balanced life around responsibilities.

- **Be clear about your teenager's responsibilities and the consequences of not keeping up with them.** For example, if your teenager gets a parking or a speeding ticket, be clear that he needs to pay for it—not you. If your teenager loses her mp3 player, she needs to find it and replace it. You can help her look, and be sensitive to her loss, but don't bail her out.

- **Keep tabs on the way your teenager is taking responsibility for his or her learning.** By this age, your teenager should be more independent, but it's still a good idea to continue to monitor his or her progress so that you're always aware of what's happening. Ask questions if needed. Lend support, but allow your teen to take responsibility for his or her life.