

Responsibility: Raising Children You Can Depend On

Have you ever heard the following comment by your child's teacher? "Johnny is so structured. His desk is neat, his assignments are color coded in a three-ring binder, and his homework is always ready on time." Or do you hear this? "Nancy is a free spirit. Her work area looks like a tornado hit it. She rarely knows where her books or assignments are, and her papers are often crumpled." Some students seem to have an innate ability to be organized and responsible, while others lack these traits. Some of us are parents of both types of children, and we wonder how they can have such different personality traits.

Conscientious students understand that they have a responsibility to learn and to reach their fullest potential.

No matter what style your child has, responsibility can be taught through intentional parental practices. Keep in mind that each child is different and that children learn to be responsible in various ways and at different rates. The following discussion shows parents how to determine the amount of responsibility children need, what skills they need to develop, how to teach responsible behaviors, and how responsibility can help children academically.

Responsibility 101

All children need opportunities to demonstrate that they are responsible for their actions, schoolwork, chores, and relationships. The act of responsibility involves being trusted, making decisions, and answering for one's behavior. Lessons in responsibility should begin early and continue throughout childhood and adolescence. A good way for parents to teach responsibility is to assign chores to children. These tasks should be opportunities to help (not punishments), and rules and consequences should be set. Parents should consistently offer their children opportunities to be responsible and should act responsibly themselves.

Be positive and provide clear feedback to children about their chores. Provide plenty of encouragement when your child demonstrates responsibility, and discuss the negative aspects of not performing the tasks well if he or she does not. Help your child realize the importance of these duties and take ownership of them. Talk in terms of the behavior rather than the person. Say, “Ashley, you did a great job washing the car.” Don’t say, “You are a good girl.” Say, “Chris, you didn’t finish mopping the floor.” Don’t say, “You are irresponsible.” The *behavior* is positive or negative. Children need to know that their parents love them unconditionally but may be disappointed with their actions.

Children should understand the details about their chores, including when they should be completed and the consequences of not doing them. Parents may need to assist their children but should not do the work for them. Children also need to know that they are responsible for correcting mistakes when possible. For example, if a child makes a mess, he or she should clean it up. Many parents post a chart on the refrigerator to indicate the child’s name, the chore, when it was finished, and how well it was done.

Ultimately, we want our children to be responsible because it is a healthy trait needed for success in life. Therefore parents should try to instill in their children a sense of intrinsic satisfaction (internal feelings of pride and happiness) rather than use extrinsic rewards (external bonuses like candy, money, or toys) for responsible behaviors.

How Much Responsibility Should Children Have?

Children’s reasoning levels advance as they get older, and parents must give them jobs that are age appropriate. As children progress, they need to show mastery of responsibility at lower levels before being offered more. Too many tasks can frustrate children, so that they feel as if they cannot accomplish all of them adequately. Children who are given tasks that are too complex may become overwhelmed and view themselves as failures. But children who are not expected to be responsible may feel unworthy and have low expectations for themselves. To build self-esteem, parents should increase the level of responsibility as their children grow and mature.

Toddlers can wash their hands, pick up their toys, choose orange juice or apple juice, and share toys with friends to practice responsibility. From an early age, children need to be able to make controlled choices and have limited authority. Young children need

to have tasks that involve only the short term. Larger projects should be separated into smaller tasks, perhaps throughout the day or week.

Elementary school children can do such household chores as setting and clearing the table, folding towels, and taking out the trash. They should get their homework done on time, lay out their clothes for school, and keep their rooms tidy. Begin to allow them to manage their money. Let them make mistakes and, yes, suffer the consequences. Children who want a new toy can be instructed to save up for it. If they spend the money elsewhere, they need to realize that they have forfeited the new toy until they have saved more money.

Involve your children in selecting chores, setting rules for their completion, and determining the consequences for incompleteness. When children have a vested interest in their actions, they are more likely to carry out their responsibilities. At this age, children understand more fully the positive lessons from being responsible and the repercussions of being irresponsible.

Middle school children can perform many household chores, such as washing the dishes, mopping the floor, doing the laundry, babysitting, and cooking simple dishes. At the preteen age, many children begin to see injustices in the world. Talk with them about the ways that they can make a difference in solving social problems. Some children begin by volunteering at homeless shelters, tutoring younger students, or running errands for elderly neighbors. These actions can develop into larger service projects during the teenage years, when children are able to take on still more responsibility. High school children are capable of being in charge of many things at home and at school. Therefore they should be trusted and given opportunities to become more involved. Teenagers should have the responsibility of managing the time they spend talking on the phone; taking care of routine chores at home, such as helping with yard work, cooking meals, taking care of siblings, running errands for the family, and shopping for groceries; working part-time jobs; and managing their own bank account. Allow teenagers the responsibility of handling their own money, so they can learn vital lessons from trial and error that will better equip them for managing their finances when they become adults.

What Skills Do Children Need to Develop Responsibility?

The following skills can be taught and are necessary to enhance your child's ability to

be responsible:

- **Perseverance.** Children need to learn the importance of working at tasks and responsibilities persistently. Often a child needs to practice the skill needed to complete the task. “Try, try again” should be one of your family’s mottoes.
- **Task commitment.** Children need to learn to stick to homework or a household chore until it is done. Help your child realize that the process is just as important as the final product.
- **Decision making.** Provide alternatives and help your children consider the criteria for making decisions. Begin teaching this at a young age, so as the children get older, they can recognize the rationale behind their decisions and can contemplate the benefits or ramifications of their choices.
- **Motivation.** When children are internally motivated, they have the drive to complete tasks without being prompted. If children are always motivated by external factors, such as money or prizes, they will behave responsibly only to receive them and may not behave responsibly when the rewards are taken away. Instill in your children the importance of being responsible because it is a duty and a privilege, not because they will receive a material reward.
- **Time management.** Children may have problems managing their time, chores, and assignments. Parents can teach their children to use a daily planner and to make a schedule. Monitor the day’s events so you can help your children design a management plan and evaluate whether their responsibilities were accomplished in a timely manner.
- **Communication.** Hold regular family meetings about chores. Let each child talk, and everyone should listen to other family members discuss their tasks, accomplishments, and mistakes. Encourage your child to communicate the ways that he or she has demonstrated responsibility.

What Can Parents Do to Teach Responsibility?

- **Be an example.** When your children see you take responsibility for things—looking out for others, getting to places on time, keeping your promises, not making excuses or blaming others for your mistakes—they will learn the benefits of being dependable. Children are more likely to emulate responsibility when they see concrete examples of it than when they just hear their parents tell them to be responsible. Remember, your example will have long-lasting effects.
- **Talk about responsible acts.** Set aside a time each day to communicate about the day’s events, and periodically talk about responsible behavior. Discuss specific

examples of people your children know, how they acted responsibly, and the personal and social benefits of their doing so.

- Illustrate what is irresponsible behavior. When you make a mistake, recognize it and let your child know that you also have to learn from mistakes and will strive to be more responsible in the future. Likewise, when your child makes a mistake, let him or her accept the responsibility. Point out examples of how people are irresponsible and talk about the negative consequences they face due to poor choices. Engaging in discussion and listening to children's input will teach them not to be irresponsible. When children see how behaving irresponsibly impacts their lives and the lives of others, they will reason that everyone will be better off if they make wise decisions and are conscientious.
- Use story characters. Use literature to teach important lessons of responsibility and other character traits. Bibliotherapy allows children to express their feelings about a character's actions or behavior and enables them to identify with the character, follow the character's situation to a resolution, and understand how the character's experience relates to their own lives. As your children read about characters who act responsibly or irresponsibly, debrief them so that they will understand why the characters behave as they do.

How Can Developing Responsibility Help Children Academically?

Children gain many things from learning responsibility. At home, they feel more a part of the family when they participate in jobs that help the entire family unit. Similarly, they feel a sense of accomplishment at school when they are responsible for certain tasks and perform them well. Their organizational skills improve at home and at school when children act responsibly. Conscientious students understand that they have a responsibility to learn and to reach their fullest potential. The intrinsic reward of a job well done will motivate your children to carry out other tasks that contribute to the home or the classroom. Their self-esteem will be heightened by opportunities for success.

Through opportunities to practice responsible behavior, children begin to view themselves as trustworthy and reliable, contributing to their sense of identity. Being responsible and productive helps children feel that they are important. Our children need to have a deep sense of responsibility to be successful, dependable citizens and confident problem solvers in every aspect of their lives.