

# The responsible child: How to teach responsibility

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Reviewed by the BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board<sup>[1]</sup>

## What to expect at this age

Grade-schoolers are quite competent at handling various responsibilities, and they're developing a sense of how some chores, like picking up litter in the park, can benefit an entire community. Remember, though, that most kids don't have much internal motivation to be responsible, so yours may still need occasional reminders. At this stage, it's best not to overload your youngster with lots of tasks. Instead, ask him to perform fewer chores — but then make sure he follows through and does them.

## What you can do

**Set a good example.** One of the best (and hardest) ways to engender responsible behavior is to be a good role model with your own possessions — put your car keys where they belong instead of on the dining room table, and tidy up your stack of magazines instead of leaving them all over the couch.

**Choose age-appropriate tasks.** Kids this age should be handling at least some tasks that require self-reliance and dependability. Your grade-schooler can make his bed every morning, load the dishwasher, or sweep up the kitchen floor. You can also help him learn to plan ahead if you ask questions such as, "What will you need in your backpack tomorrow at school?" and "What equipment will you need to have at your swim class this afternoon?"

A grade-schooler can also learn about responsibility to the community. So bring him along to a park cleanup day, or get involved in a community flower-planting project.

He'll take pride in his contributions toward improving his neighborhood.

**Teach first things first.** Your youngster knows by now that work comes before play, but you still need to reinforce this basic rule. "I want to go swimming too," you can tell him. "But remember, first we need to clean up after lunch." Be friendly and matter of fact about it, and admit that you, too, prefer the fun — then he knows that you're not being bossy, but are simply expecting him to behave responsibly.

**Make the job a game.** Remember learning about barn-raising parties, where the whole village would help a family build a barn, and then everyone would share a feast? We all enjoy tasks more when they're fun, social occasions. Your grade-schooler will love helping to wash the car on a hot day if spraying himself (or you!) with the hose is allowed.

**Try not to scold.** It's tough to keep your cool when your child repeatedly fails to do what's expected of him. But lectures and punishments rarely work — at least not over the long haul — and they won't teach him self-discipline. Instead, try getting your point across with humor. Kids this age love it when their parents act sillier than they do. Instead of scolding your youngster for leaving his cereal bowl on the floor for the dog to lick clean, come back to the topic later that day and say, "Okay, let's pretend this is an empty bowl from breakfast. What can we do with it? We can...put it on our heads! Is that a good idea? No. Okay, we can...throw it in the bathtub! No? Okay, we can...put it in the sink!" He'll not only enjoy the silliness of this game, he'll also learn to compare and evaluate possible solutions.

**Change the cues.** One of the most frustrating aspects of parenthood is having to repeat the same thing every day (or several times a day!). "How often do I have to tell you to hang up your coat?" "How many times do I have to tell you to put your dirty clothes in the hamper!" It gets so you can't bear to hear yourself. What you may not realize, however, is that as a result of this kind of nagging, your grade-schooler has learned to respond to the verbal cue, even if it's a negative one. "This is when it's time to rewind the tape," says Paul Coleman, a father, psychologist, and the author of *How to Say It to Your Kids*. "Tell your child, 'Go back outside. Good, now come back in, and hang the coat up *when you come in.*' Cheer when he does it. The stimulus of coming in the door becomes the cue, rather than your verbal request. And teaching him new behavior can actually be fun."

**Expect ups and downs.** "Kids are going to mess up. That's part of being a kid," says

Coleman. "But you can usually get more compliance when they realize there's a pattern." So try not to express anger or disappointment if your grade-schooler's having an off day. Just say to him calmly, "Remember, you always feed the dog right before we set the table."

**Keep a record.** Visual evidence works well with this age group. Try using a wall chart that lists chores, and add a sticker every time your child does his. When he's earned ten stickers, he gets to watch a special video or invite a friend over. This kind of record-keeping acts as an incentive but not a bribe. It also provides concrete proof of his efforts and boosts his pride in them.

**Phrase things in a positive way.** Jerry Wyckoff, a family psychologist and the coauthor of *Twenty Teachable Virtues*, suggests using what he calls "Grandma's rule" to encourage responsible behavior. Instead of issuing an ultimatum ("If you *don't*, then you *won't*"), Grandma's rule says, "When you've done what you have to do, *then* you get to do what you want to do." "Grandma's rule makes it clear that your household has rules that everyone follows," says Wyckoff. If your child says, "John asked me to come over to his house today. I want to go," respond with, "When you've finished your homework, then you can go play." Saying, "If you finish your homework, I'll take you to a movie," on the other hand, really just bribes your grade-schooler for what should be ordinary behavior — and it raises the possibility that he'll decide he can live without the treat and thus pass on finishing his homework.

**Give him space.** Much as you may be tempted to grab your grade-schooler's clothes and fold them properly yourself, try to resist. Instead, concentrate more on his efforts than his actual accomplishments. He may not be doing a perfect job, but criticizing him or co-opting his work will only squelch his desire to be responsible. Try making your suggestions nicely or even with gentle ruefulness, as in, "That's a pretty good job with the bed. I usually put my dirty clothes in the hamper first, though, instead of pulling the sheets up over them." Your tone will help him get the point without feeling defensive and tuning you out.

**Let him take the consequences.** As long as the outcome isn't harsh or dangerous, let your grade-schooler live with the results of the choices he makes. If he's responsible for packing his homework into his backpack each morning and he doesn't do it, don't hand-deliver it to his classroom later. He may regret having forgotten his homework, but you can bet he'll remember it tomorrow. You can nudge him along by asking him how he can remember next time.

**Take your child's temperament into account.** If he's consistently failing to meet his responsibilities, step back and think about whether he needs some extra help.

Beginning a project is hard for many kids, and if yours is a bit passive he may need you to help him get started (then step back and let him carry on by himself). If he's easily overwhelmed, make sure your instructions are very clear. If he's the willful type, try to present the task matter-of-factly, not as an order.

**Pour on the praise.** Positive reinforcement will teach your child that his efforts are important and appreciated. When appropriate, point out exactly how he's helped everyone else: "Great! Now that you've mowed the lawn, we can all have a volleyball game this afternoon."

1. <http://www.babycenter.com/prkit-advisoryboard>