

Teaching Kids a Sense of Responsibility

“It’s not my job.” Ever heard that?

Too often, kids and parents tangle over who’s responsible for what chore around the house. But experts say to look beyond the individual chore at hand. That’s because behind every chore is a primary lesson of life: that taking responsibility means contributing to something larger than yourself and respecting yourself for the contribution.

Within our families, we develop a sense of ourselves as unique persons with unique contributions to make to the world. The family teaches a child how to be part of the larger world—a classmate at school, a friend in the neighborhood, an employee later in life. A child first learns to “do his part” by taking responsibility for his own chores within the family.

Whether large, like bringing in an income, or small, like dusting a tabletop, all tasks help the family to function. When one person doesn’t do her job, the process can break down. For example, a family may divide up the specific tasks required to clean, fold, and put away laundry and assign each task—from taking the basket to the laundry room to matching the socks—to a family member.



But if one child doesn’t take the empty clothes basket back upstairs, the rest of the family can’t put their dirty clothes in it. If someone else doesn’t bring the basket down to the laundry room, mom can’t wash and dry the dirty laundry. Then, dad can’t fold it, and everyone will be upset because they won’t have clean clothes to wear.

Consistent responsibilities help your child learn to be accountable, show self-restraint, and pursue excellence. When teaching responsibility, remember that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And a functioning family is just that—greater when each member is responsible and contributes to the whole family. When all of the parts are contributing to the smooth functioning of the whole, laundry gets put away, food gets prepared, and burned-out light bulbs get replaced.

And more important, each time your child completes a task, another small building block of his character is put into place.

More than Just Taking Out the Trash

Taking responsibility is more than just scrubbing the floor or watering the plants—it’s learning about character and contributing to the family.

After self-care—such as teeth-brushing, dressing, and eating healthy—responsibility extends outward to the family. From fixing meals to washing laundry to shopping for household goods to cleaning shared spaces, everyday tasks are a good way to begin teaching a child about her responsibilities within the family.

Ideally, the process begins early enough so that the child still delights in helping and wants to do things together. The age and maturity level of each family member will help determine the tasks he can handle. A 6-year-old may not be able to mop the kitchen floor, but may be able to dry the silverware and put it into a drawer.

Take the opportunity to call a family meeting and talk broadly about the importance of responsibility in the world. Ask family members questions about what they think their responsibilities are for themselves and the family. Make sure you start this process early, even with preschoolers or kindergarteners. It's never too early to instill a sense of responsibility.



Talk about times when you were impressed by the way a child or teenager took responsibility for something. Discuss your feelings about a time when someone showed irresponsible behavior and why you think the action, not the person, set a bad example.

As your child matures, you may want to talk about larger ideas of character and goodness in people—traits like trustworthiness, respect, fairness, caring, citizenship, honesty, courage, diligence, and integrity.



Much of the time, teaching household responsibility is not about telling a child what she should do. It's about asking her what she would be willing to do and telling her why that willingness is vital to her well-being and the smooth running of the household.

Feed the Cat, Fold the Clothes... The Daily Grind

Think of all of the tasks it takes to run the house—monthly, weekly, daily, even hourly—and write them down. For the more complex tasks—for instance, laundry—break them down into subtasks (putting clothes in the basket, washing and drying clothes, folding clothes, etc.). Then, have each member talk about which task he might be able to complete successfully and why.

Choosing chores is an easy and fun activity to do as a family. You might draw straws—the longest straw drawn gives the holder the right to pick first from a list of chores. You may also want to play a game and allow the winner to choose the first chore.

Post the chores in a central location and include a checklist so that family members can cross off each task as they complete it. Children like visuals, and the act of crossing off a task will solidify their accomplishment. Rotate the household duties in a logical order and even allow trading of chores between members. But make sure that one person isn't paying another to do her chores.

As children grow, they can take on larger tasks that used to be difficult for them (e.g., putting dishes away in cabinets when they grow tall enough). As they move into the teenage years, young people can take on even greater responsibilities, which help them develop independence and an ever-increasing sense of self-reliance and competence.



To Reward or Not To Reward

When discussing the family operations, talk about the vital role of each member to the whole and how important it is to work together in certain ways. Come up with examples of what could happen when something doesn't get done.

Afterwards, talk with your family about the types of rewards and consequences that will be a part of the process. If a person completes a task, does he get a monetary reward such as an allowance? If he doesn't complete a task, does he lose TV and computer time? End by suggesting short, once-a-week family meetings to talk about progress and challenges that arise. Remember to be fair: If a parent fails or succeeds in his responsibilities, he should take a consequence or reap a reward.

Avoid Blame, Try Creativity

Remember to avoid blaming and labeling when your child doesn't complete her tasks. Have clear consequences and carry them out. Try creative ways to remind your child of his responsibilities. Rather than telling your child that he's lazy for not picking up clothing strewn across his bedroom floor, ask whether it is being left for the "invisible maid."

Offer daily praise and encouragement. Just telling your child what you see and feel can make a huge difference: "I see that you put away the crayons after you finished coloring. It makes the dining room table so clean when they are put away."

Remember that children model the behavior of their parents. So don't expect a child to take on a responsibility when you forget yours. Set a good example to instill a sense of responsibility in young children. Doing so will help teach them the many skills they need to deal with the ups and downs of life: self-reliance, cooperation, giving and receiving, and living with others.

The material found in this document has been adapted from the article "Teaching Kids a Sense of Responsibility", available at <http://family.samhsa.gov>.