

# BUILDING RESPONSIBILITY IN CHILDREN

Children learn responsibility from their families. They learn it by example, by teaching and by practice.

The way you interact with your child affects what he learns about responsibility.

The following are some simple things you can do to encourage responsibility.

**Distinguish between questions and orders.** Ask questions that can be answered yes or no only if the child has a real choice. Don't ask, *"Do you want to get dressed now?"* if the only acceptable answer is yes. Your child may assume that either yes or no is acceptable. If you phrase your orders as though they were requests, and reject your child's answers time after time, he will have difficulty learning to make wise decisions.

**Alternate types of praise.** Children need encouragement. When you say, *"I'm glad you picked up your toys so quickly,"* children sense your pleasure. You are offering them praise from an external source. As children grow older they need to feel the pride in accomplishment themselves. Gradually you can reflect their internal satisfaction, for example, *"I bet you're proud of how quickly you picked up all your toys."*

**Picture your child being responsible.** Draw pictures or take photos of the tasks your child is supposed to do. Hang the picture on the child's door or in a family "hall of honor."

**Let children choose their areas of responsibility.** List several tasks you would like your children to do. For example: pick up belongings, put dirty clothes in laundry area, fold clean laundry, hang up clothes, set the table, bring in the newspaper, feed the pets, etc. Let them pick which ones they will be responsible for.

**Reward responsible actions differently from obedience.** If you give your preschooler one sticker for picking up her toys promptly when requested, give her two stickers for picking them up without being reminded. Everyone likes recognition for what they have done, particularly when they are learning a new skill or habit.



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

**Establish clear criteria for success.** How clean is clean? How soon is soon? Often the standards are clear to the parent, but not to the child. If you don't want your child simply to learn by failing to do the task as you expected, you need to make your messages as clear as possible. For example: *"I want you to pick up those toys soon!"* is not a clear message, as "soon" may mean five minutes to you, but it probably won't have the same meaning to your preschooler. However, if you say, *"You need to pick up those toys before you have your milk and cookies,"* your preschooler will have a better understanding of your expectations.

**Model the behavior you want.** Parents delay responding to children's requests for help with, *"In a minute,"* or *"When I'm done here."* But somehow that time never comes. Set a timer and tell the child, *"I'll come when it rings,"* and then do it, whether it is convenient or not.

**Play "What would you do if. . . ?"** Most preschoolers are taught a set of rules rather than the principles behind them. If they run into a new situation, they don't know what to do. You can teach them to think by asking, *"What would you do if. . . ?"* (What if we were in a shopping mall and you got lost? What if you see a wire hanging from a pole? What if you found something on the ground that looked good to eat?) Respect whatever answer the child comes up with, but use the opportunity to give him more information.

**When you goof, share with your child how you plan to do better next time.** Sometimes children feel overwhelmed by all that is expected of them. They need models more for how to improve, than how to be perfect. If you forgot to take an important paper to work you can say, *"Uh-oh! Next time I had better write a note and tape it on the door so I will remember."*

**Help your child find ways to motivate himself or herself.** In the beginning parents may need to provide the motivation (rewards) to children. However, it is useful for children to learn to praise themselves and give themselves treats. You might say, for example, *"What would you like to do as a special treat when you get all your toys picked up?"*

**Teach children ways to make unpleasant tasks fun.** One characteristic of successful people is the ability to get themselves to do things they don't really want to do. You might explain to your preschooler, *"Sometimes it's easier to do a job if you do one part of the job at a time – so let's fold only the clothes that are the color red first. Then we'll do each color by itself."*

There is no one way to be responsible. Children need a variety of tools to use in different situations. You can expand upon these ideas to give children the skills and experiences they need to be responsible.