



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

How Can I Teach My Child Responsibility?

Helping a child develop into a responsible adult is a fundamental task of parenthood. By assuming responsibility—first for herself, then within the family, and finally as a member of the larger community—a child can experience the satisfaction that comes from accomplishment and develop a robust confidence in herself.

Childhood Chores

The idea that everyone should do his share is a basic value held by most of us. Participating in family chores can strengthen a child's sense of belonging and contributing to the common good. It also minimizes the chances that he will take others' efforts and contributions to his welfare for granted.

Choose the right chores for your child's age and level of ability.

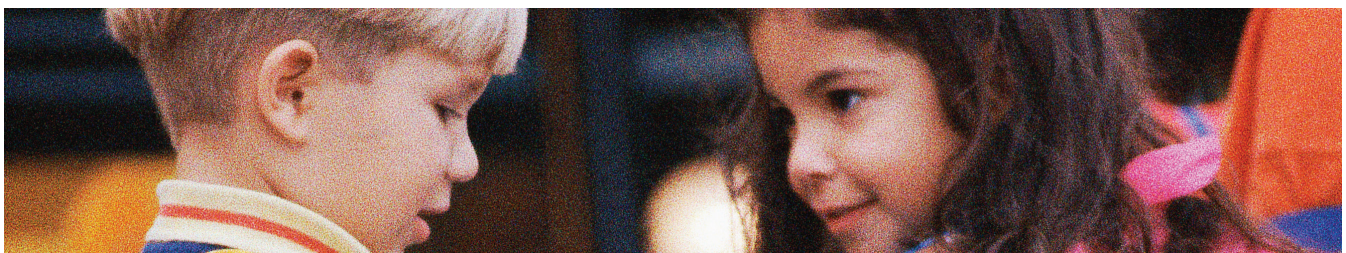
The following are some points to keep in mind while helping your child become a contributing member of the household:

- **Choose beginning tasks at which your child can easily succeed.** You can start when your child is very young and gradually increase responsibility as she matures developmentally. Children often express interest in helping with household tasks between the ages of two and three. A child of this age might be expected to put a few toys away. However, do not expect her to do this alone in her bedroom. Requiring a very young child to do a task out of sight of others may be a bit too difficult in the early stages. It is a better idea to begin with jobs that are done in full view of an admiring adult, such as putting napkins at each place setting or tearing

lettuce for a salad.

- **Make tasks manageable.** Jobs given to young children should have a defined beginning and end.
- **Give children chores that have obvious value to you and your family.** They recognize busy work. Simple tasks like washing a pet's food dish or folding small pieces of laundry are understandable to a young child. Remember to tell your child how useful and important his work is to the family. Let your child overhear you tell a friend how his help with the dinner dishes makes a difference in how smoothly the household runs.
- **Assign chores that produce pleasant effects.** These are usually more satisfying than jobs that leave little to show for one's efforts. Setting a table is more rewarding than cleaning it—the table looks nice and others can admire the work!
- **Teach children how to do a job.** Demonstrate first and then practice with them before you turn task over. Share some chores with your children. Working together requires coordination and cooperation. For many children, it may be easier to be part of a team cleaning the family room than it is to clean their own rooms by themselves.
- **Give an incentive to finish.** Link pleasures to responsibilities—making a fruit gelatin means family members will enjoy a tasty dessert, cleaning up the yard means a place to practice kickball.

Learning the ways to help, share, cheer up, and provide companionship to others sets the stage for developing a sense of social responsibility.



- **Set reasonable performance standards, and be prepared to accept a less-than-perfect performance.** If a parent constantly finds fault and redoes the task, the child's effort has no value. If you find yourself often thinking or saying aloud, "I might as well do it myself," it may mean you have chosen the wrong chore for your child's age and level of ability. Keep your expectations consistent and predictable. Children need to know what acceptable standard looks like.
- **Help you child follow through on completing her assigned tasks.** If your child regularly procrastinates, resist the temptation to nag! This will only incite further resistance. Instead, point out in a matter-of-fact way that you and other family members are counting on her completion of the task.

Beyond Chores

Teaching a child to be responsible is more than a matter of chores, however. Reaching out to help family members and friends is another way children become responsible. An older child can be asked to read to a younger sibling or drop in on a housebound grandparent who lives nearby. A kindergartner may not understand the concept of social responsibility but will understand "Bring Mrs. Brown's newspaper into her porch so she will not fall on the icy steps." Learning ways to help, share, cheer up, and provide companionship to others sets the stage for developing a sense of social responsibility.

How can parents help children take responsibility as a member of the larger community?

The most important way a parent can teach responsibility is by example. Encourage your daughter to accompany you when you go to vote. Take your son with you when you bring clothes to the Salvation Army. Explain to your preschooler that we throw trash in the cans at the zoo so everyone can enjoy the area. Arrange for children to participate in a community project such as planting flowers in a favorite park. Help your child understand why you choose particular social causes and convictions. Allow him to share why he may take exception to your position.

Children need parental guidance to help them learn how to make and keep commitments. Help your son understand that when he signs up to take gymnastics, he is making a commitment to participate each week. If partway through the course he announces he wants to drop out, talk about why he has changed his mind and remind him of his commitment. Often, a child will make a promise to another child and then fail to see the commitment through because a better offer comes along. Talk to your child about the hurt she can inflict on others by not fulfilling her promises. When such reflection and discussion fail to work, it is important for parents to insist that obligations be met. As significant as commitments are, however, there are times when you may approve of your child declining a commitment—an unfair arrangement made under pressure from peers, for example. This is a time to talk with him about the importance to think through obligations before making a commitment to action.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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