

Building Responsibility

How do I teach my children to be more responsible?

The University of Arizona • College of Agriculture • Tucson, Arizona 85721

7/98

Working with the Young Child: Ages 4 - 8

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"Responsibility is the ability to recognize and react appropriately"

—H. Stephen Glenn

Responsibility is a value children learn from their parents, schools, peers, and society. It is a lifelong skill that helps children be successful throughout life.

Children grow into responsible adults when they are taught and guided to act responsibly. Teaching your children responsibility can begin when they are young.

Finding ways to teach your child a sense of responsibility is one of the best characteristics you can develop in your child, say child and education specialists.

Research suggests that children who are *told what to do...not to try this or that* may grow up to have real difficulty making decisions. Parent-guided decision making helps children try out and learn responsibility.

Failure to learn responsibility is related to failure in school, in work, and relationships. Research shows that children who act responsibly receive more positive attention from adults and peers.

Guiding your young child towards more responsible behavior **can and should** begin with 4 to 8 year olds.

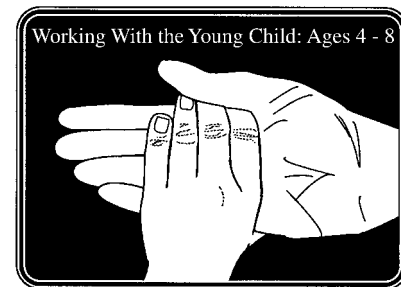
Parents ask: "How do I teach responsibility?" Without realizing it, you're teaching your children responsibility, by your behavior and words. Remember how young children delight in pointing out your errors, such as saying a nasty word. They're learning through watching and repeating what they see you do.

Habits of Successful Parents

1. Help Your Child See How Their Actions Effect Others.

Tommy, when you and Jeremy fight and you hit him, how do you think his body feels? How do you think he feels about your being his friend? When someone hits you, how do you feel about them?

This habit of reflection can begin with young children. Ask simple questions. Avoid tones of guilt, blame and anger.



2. Practice discipline without always making it a punishment.

Really effective discipline is done to control behavior by using fair and respectful rules. Punishment is one of the least effective ways to discipline. Using this disciplinary approach, if your child hit a playmate, you would:

- Step 1 Remove her from the situation.
- Step 2 Calm her down with a hug, holding of hands or looking at her eye-to-eye or setting "time-out." This contact should have a calming effect.
- Step 3 Point out how the other injured child feels.
- Step 4 Give her ideas for what to do the next time. If she is older (8 years or more) ask her ideas for doing things differently.

When doing steps 2 and 3 using appropriate touch and eye contact gets you onto your child's level. This helps deliver the message with firmness and caring.

3. Regularly follow through with consequences that have been discussed in advance.

Children develop responsibility when they are clear about the outcome of their actions and when the consequences are fairly and firmly applied. Like loosing the use of a toy that has been used improperly or harmfully.

4. Practice what you preach.

Your actions send messages. Match your behavior to what you are saying. If you use foul language, but expect your child to not use four-letter words, you're sending a confusing message.

Steps to Developing a More Responsible Child

The building blocks for learning many different skills should and can begin with young children. And you couldn't have a more willing audience because young children are driven to please.

Teaching your child to be responsible is like stacking a pile of blocks. Each block adds a skill towards acting and making responsible choices.

As your child grows older, his thinking skills help him to connect his *actions + consequences = decisions to act appropriately in future, similar situations.*

Although your young child is learning that his actions result in consequences, he may not yet be able to connect how to act in future situations. Four to eight year olds may not be ready to tie past actions to the future.

Your child may need to be reminded of what he learned in the past. After a reminder, then he can apply it to the future. For example, your child has a friend who tells "tall tales" that are upsetting. When another "story" is told, your child may need reminding about what she learned from the last event. A talk about...*remember the last time when Jessica said those untrue things and you cried? Remember how we talked about your walking away from her and telling her later how the stories hurt you?*

Helping your child learn this last step takes time, patient reminders and a maturity that she will develop in time.

Steps to Building Responsible 4- to 8-Year Olds

It is through active participation in events or activities that children learn and develop skills that lead to acting appropriately. A very young child may learn bike riding from watching older sisters ride. But the real learning comes from actually doing it himself on a real bike.

Your role is to give your son the chance to practice riding a bike in a safe setting.

Your child needs to understand the parts of riding a bike like signaling, stopping and keeping the bike safely stored. These are all steps to learning responsible skills and actions. "He must know that riding a bike to school, includes "...I've got to take my bike lock" to know that "...my bike will still be there to ride home." This is a step to seeing **the important parts** of bike ownership.

TRYING

This step comes by allowing a child safe parent guided experience

UNDERSTANDING

Use a WHAT question:

"What did you see?"

"What are you feeling?"

"What was the most important thing?"

SOLVING

Help your child see the parts of their actions by asking a WHAT or WHY question.

Understand each other's rules and expectations about riding and keeping a bike. Look at how each other sees a situation, helps your child look at things from another view. This skill teaches insight, feeling for others and is needed for developing friendships.

Teaching your child to see that his actions have results, is a final step to developing responsibility through problem solving.

A new bike may mean *new independence* for your child. For you, it means that getting your son to school on time is now controlled by him. It frees you from car pooling children to school.

Helping your child recognize that riding a bike to school both helps the family and gives him freedom, encourages future responsible behavior. Do this by asking your son "...*what was important to you about learning to ride your bike?*" Follow up with, "...*by learning to safely ride your bike, you've helped me not be so rushed in the morning and you can be proud of what you can do.*"

Summary

Responsibility is a lifelong skill that you can teach to your younger children—beginning now!

Your child will be better armed to make decisions, learn control and grow as you want her to, as a person who does tasks without whining or your constant direction.

Start small. Your efforts to help your child do tasks, like packing her own lunch, is the first step.

Remember that when we do something right, we need to hear praise. More importantly, we need to know WHAT WAS “IT” that got us that praise, so we can figure “it” out, to do “it” again! If your boss ever told you, “...you did a good job,” wouldn’t you be wondering what “it” was exactly? Your child needs to have the parts of well performed (as well as poorly performed) tasks explained.

Follow that step by helping your child reflect on how her actions contribute to your family.

These simple steps will help your child feel capable and encourage her to develop more responsible behavior.

Resources

Glenn, Stephen, *Raising Self-Reliant Children: In a Self-Indulgent World*, Prima Publishing, Rocklin, CA 1989.

Shapiro, Lawrence, *Tricks of the Trade*, The Center for Applied Psychology. The King of Prussia: Pennsylvania, 1994.

“*Working with the Young Child: Ages 4–8*” is a series of six bulletins authored by Arizona Cooperative Extension Family Task Force members. The bulletins cover the same major topics found in “*Understanding Youth: Working with the Early Adolescent*” curriculum, but address younger children.

Time Out Tip

You can make **timeouts** more effective when you set a time limit using these two methods.

1. Time-outs that have no agreed upon end are not effective.
2. Assign one minute of “time out” for each year of your child’s age. (A six year old would have a 6 minute time out).
3. The more effective way to keep “timeouts” is to let the child end it when they feel they are under control or ready to try again. When your child feels he is ready to end the timeout, ask what he plans to do if the problem happens again.
4. Letting a child determine the end of his time-out allows him to think about what is happening. It also teaches him to control his emotions. It shows that calmer emotions are needed to solve problems.

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