

Fostering Responsibility

Start of the school year is an exciting time for children. They look forward to meeting old friends and learning new things. However, school year brings its challenges as well. Doing homework, practicing piano and completing projects can become a source of conflict between children and their parents.

Though at times stressful, deadlines



and assigned tasks can also present great opportunities for developing character in children. While we have many occasions in pre-school years to call children to practice the virtues of courtesy and generosity, the virtues of responsibility and self-discipline get their greatest boost during school years. Successful development of these virtues early in life greatly contributes to children's success in higher academic pursuits and future careers. It will also help them become useful members of society.

Some suggestions on how to foster responsibility in children:

* Model responsible behavior. Start with yourself. Be aware of your words and actions and their effects on your children. Take care of your belongings, admit mistakes and take measures to amend them. Take your agreements seriously, be a law abiding citizen and act responsibly towards nature and your environment. Put your best into whatever you assume responsibility for.

* Know your child's capabilities and assign tasks accordingly. Know his concentration span, his motor skills, his

ability to tell the time, etc. before you assign responsibility to him. Then increase his responsibility as he grows. A two year old can be given the responsibility of putting his toys back when he is finished playing. Later when he starts school, he can be assigned a desk at home where he can keep his school-related papers in an organized manner. Once he can achieve this, he can be assigned an area of the house like a garden patch or study room to take care of. Determine what possible tasks or responsibilities related to school work or housework can realistically be carried out by your child without much supervision. Five year old Andrea can be responsible to brush her own teeth and dress herself in the morning, but she cannot comb and tie her long hair well by herself. Making her responsible to do her hair in the morning might demoralize her and frustrate both of you. Limiting her responsibilities at this time to brushing teeth and dressing up would enhance her self-esteem and motivate her to assume more responsibilities later.

* Assign meaningful responsibilities. Young children feel good when they are trusted with real housework such as washing the dishes, dusting, cleaning the table, etc. Older children can be invited to choose their contribution to the family from a list of household chores. In some families, children are given the task of planning and preparing the family meal one night a week. This not only relieves the parents from cooking duties and teaches practical life skills to children, it also helps them have a higher appreciation of the effort that goes into the preparation of a meal.

* Coach your child. For the first few times, ensure he understands the assigned task and is comfortable with performing it. It is not enough to say, "I trust you. You can do it. Good luck!" If nine year old John is assigned the responsibility of washing the dishes on Mondays, it is important that he is patiently and carefully taught where to

get the detergent, how much to use each time, how to soak and scrub the dishes to ensure sticky food is cleaned off, whether to let the dishes to dry or dry them with a cloth, etc. Clear and concise explanation of what constitutes a "job well done" helps children feel good about assuming responsibility and greatly enhances their self-esteem.

* Acknowledge effort. If your child is expected to begin her homework at 5:30 every week night but she misses the target two nights out of five, acknowledge the effort of being responsible for the three nights and encourage her to try to reach the goal of five nights the next week. Explore ways to remove obstacles together and help her succeed.

* Link responsibility to freedom. Help children understand the benefits of responsible behavior. If your child remembers to practice the piano every day, acknowledge his responsibility and reward him by allowing him some freedom to choose the specific time he would like to practice the piano. Similarly, if your teenager responsibly informs you of where she is going and calls you upon arrival to her destination, she may be trusted with the freedom to stay out a little longer in her outings with her friends.

* Don't give up. We are all born with strengths in different virtues. Responsible behavior might come easily to some children and hard to others. It might take longer for some to remember to bring their jacket, assignment or glasses home after an exciting game of soccer. Though very frustrating at times, try to refrain from giving hurtful and humiliating labels to children such as "irresponsible" or "scatter brain". Shaming children discourages them from trying again and lowers their self-esteem. It might take some gentle and creative reminding for a while before it becomes a habit.

With perseverance and loving guidance, all children respond positively and develop more responsible behavior in due time.

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