

25 Ways Parents Can ...

Build Responsibility in Children



...and Help Them Do Better in School



Children Need Responsibility

Children who learn to be responsible at home do better in school. And they grow up to become responsible, productive adults.

When you teach your child to be responsible for making decisions, completing schoolwork, following rules and doing chores, you set your child up for success in the future. For example, if your child practices making everyday choices now, it will be easier to make responsible decisions later when faced with serious issues such as drug use and dating. And being responsible for schoolwork and chores now will teach your child the responsibility needed to hold down a job and run a household in the future.

You can build responsibility in your child by talking about responsible choices, giving your child chances to practice responsibility, and teaching your child strategies to keep track of responsibilities. This booklet shows you 25 specific ways to build responsibility in your child.



1 Talk about how all choices have consequences. During dinner, have family members share choices they made that day—and the results of those choices.

Here are some examples:

- “I chose to study. The result was that I got an A on my math test.”
- “I chose to get up 15 minutes late. The result was that I missed breakfast—and nearly missed the bus.”
- “I chose to go for a walk during my lunch hour at work. The result was that I felt more energetic all afternoon.”



This discussion will show your child that everyone makes choices every day. Even more importantly, your child will start thinking about taking responsibility for personal decisions.

2 Make sure your child learns that actions have consequences. Use *logical consequences* whenever possible—in other words, help your child connect actions with their results. For example:

- “You were late for school today, so you’ll need to get up earlier tomorrow. That means going to bed earlier tonight.”
- “You finished studying. Now you have time to play a game.”
- “You forgot to return your library book. If you remember it tomorrow, you can check out a new book.”

3 Encourage responsibility for living things. You might have your older child walk your younger one to the bus stop. And your little one could be in charge of feeding the dog. They'll feel a sense of pride when others depend on them to be responsible.

Another idea is to plant a garden together, in the yard or in pots on a window ledge. Once the garden is planted, your child will have to weed and water it or the plants will not grow. Praise your child for being responsible and hardworking.

4 Consider giving your child an allowance or some way to regularly earn a little money. Responsible money management is a skill every child needs to learn.

How much allowance or earnings is enough? The answer depends on your family's budget and your child's age. In general, it should be an amount large enough to allow your child to buy some small treats, but small enough to encourage saving for something special.

5 Don't make it easy to forget. If your child often leaves books or assignments at home, don't always deliver them to school. If your child leaves a soccer ball at the park, don't rush out to buy another one.

6 **Teach community responsibility.** Your child needs to learn that communities—and countries—run better when everyone assumes some responsibility.

Together, choose a way your family can show responsibility for your community. For example:

- **Participate** in a neighborhood cleanup.
- **Donate** food or time to a local food bank.

You might also encourage responsibility for preserving the environment. When your child bikes to a friend's house instead of asking you for a ride, that saves energy. When your child recycles paper, that saves trees.



7 **Be a model of responsibility.** Volunteer to help the school. Attend parent meetings. Be sure to vote in the next election—and take your child with you when you do.

8 **Teach your child to be a savvy shopper.** One way to do this is to take a trip to the grocery store together. Put your child in charge of choosing groceries for lunches or snacks. Set a budget for the week and some guidelines. For example, you might require each lunch to include one fruit, one vegetable and a sandwich. Then let your child choose how to satisfy those requirements.

Depending on what your child selects, there may be money left over for special drinks or snacks. Giving your child some control can also cut down on complaints—your child chose those lunches, after all.

9 **Expect your child to honor commitments.** Talk together about promises. When people don't do things they've promised, the consequences can be serious. Plants that don't get watered begin to wilt. Garbage that isn't taken out starts to stink. And pets that don't get fed may suffer.



10 Let your child make choices. If children are to learn how to make responsible choices about drugs and sex, they first need plenty of practice making *other* decisions.

When your child was younger, you probably offered choices about what to wear. *You* decided that it was too cold for shorts, but you let your child choose between the red pants and the blue jeans.

The same technique works as your child gets older. Your child can:

- **Choose which vegetable** the family will eat for dinner. (You decide there will be a vegetable, but your child chooses between green beans and broccoli.)
- **Choose whether** to participate in swimming or basketball (but not both).
- **Choose whether** to do chores right after school or after dinner.



As often as possible, let your child make choices within the limits you have set. Say things like, “You decide,” or “I trust you to make that choice.”

11 **Recognize jobs well done.** Here's one way to do it: You'll need two empty jars. Label one with your name, and fill it with about 200 small objects, like buttons, coins or pebbles. Label the second (empty) jar with your child's name.

Next, draw up a list of tasks your child is expected to do during a day. These include both at-home responsibilities (brush teeth, make bed, put away clean clothes) and school responsibilities (finishing schoolwork on time).

At the end of each day, go through the list of responsibilities. For each job completed—and done well—move an item out of your jar and into your child's jar.

Filling the jar earns your child a chance to choose a fun activity for the family to do. Options might include a movie night, a camping trip or a pajama party in the living room for the whole family.

12 **Review your rules regularly.** Each year, perhaps on your child's birthday, spend some time rethinking the rules. Is your child ready for more freedom?

At the same time, let your child see that responsibility and freedom go hand in hand. As your child takes on more responsibility around the house, adjust your rules to allow more freedom.

13 **Talk with your child about moral responsibility.** For example, ask, “Do you think it is it ever OK to cheat on a test? Why or why not?”

During these discussions, share your own values. But more importantly, listen to what your child has to say. After all, you won’t be there the day a friend at school asks to copy your child’s math answers.

14 **Let your child make some choices about schoolwork.** It must be completed, of course, but your student could decide:

- **Whether to work** in the bedroom or at the kitchen table.
- **Whether to do it** right after school or spend some time playing first.
- **Whether to do math** first or start with spelling.
- **Whether to schedule** one long work period or two shorter ones.



Talk about these choices together. Let your child choose which works best. Of course, if a choice doesn’t work (your child plays outside until dark and can’t finish assignments before bedtime), explain that you will make the choice tomorrow.

Avoid the Morning ‘Rush Hour’

Even the most responsible children sometimes have trouble getting organized and out the door in the morning. And for some kids, mornings can be chaotic indeed.

Here are some tried and true ways to encourage your child to be more responsible in the morning, so you can end “rush hour” at your house.

15 Set aside a special place for your child to keep everything needed for school. Many families use a large cardboard box for each person.

Have your child choose a place for the box near the front door or bedroom door. Every afternoon, your child’s *first* job is to place all school items in the box. When assignments are finished, they go back in the box. In the morning, the box is your child’s last stop before heading out the door.

16 Teach your child to use a head-to-toe checklist. Before heading out the door, have your child run through a list: “My hat’s on my head, my coat’s on my body, my gloves are on my hands, my worksheet is in my backpack and my backpack’s on my back.”

17 Create a checklist together of everything your child takes to school on a typical day. Post it by the front door. Add self-stick notes for any special items: “Don’t forget field trip permission slip today.” Have your child double-check the list before leaving.

18 Provide an alarm clock. Have your child assume the responsibility of getting up in the morning. Talk about the consequences if family members don’t get up on time.



19 Use music in your morning routine. If your child tends to dawdle in the morning, take a tip from one musical family. After the children wake up, they begin to play a favorite playlist. The children know that when the music stops, they should be dressed for school.

Not only will everyone be more aware of time passing themselves, you may also find that everyone’s mood improves as you start the day singing!

Share the Load

Keeping a household going is a lot of work. Children can—and should—assume some of the load.

When everyone pitches in to share the work, you'll have a happier family and more responsible children. (You'll also have a tidier house.) Following are some suggestions for encouraging your children to help around the house.

20 **Schedule a family meeting.** Explain what needs to be done to keep your household running. Talk about how you need everyone's help. Make sure jobs are appropriate for each child's age and ability.

21 **Create a system.** The happiest families have developed "no-nag" methods to remind kids to do their chores.

Some families make a big chart listing all the regular chores and the person responsible for each one. When a chore is completed, it is marked off on the chart.

Try rotating tasks so that no one gets bored. The person who feeds and walks the dog this week may wash the dishes next week and do the vacuuming the week after.

22 **Make yours an equal opportunity household.** All children should learn how to prepare food—and how to use hammers, screwdrivers and other household tools. (Insist on adult supervision.)

Show your children some of the skills they'll need later in life. Sewing on buttons and washing a load of clothes are things kids can practice now. Not only will you be increasing their responsibilities, but you will also be building their self-confidence by helping them feel more capable.



23 **Don't redo chores.** Before giving your child a responsibility, demonstrate how to do it step by step. Don't be surprised if you have to repeat the lesson.

Once you're sure your child knows how to do a chore, resist the urge to redo it. Instead, compliment what your child did well and explain how to improve weak areas next time.

What if chores are often done in a rushed, sloppy way? Have your child redo them. It will soon become clear that it takes less time to do things correctly the first time.

24 **Teach your child to prepare healthy foods.** Together, look through your cookbooks or check out a children's cookbook from the library.

Talk with your child about taking responsibility for eating healthy foods. Teach your child that foods can be nutritious and still taste good. Cheese cubes, fresh fruit or vegetables and dip are all tasty and nutritious.

Supervise when your child is working in the kitchen. Demonstrate how to handle kitchen equipment safely to prepare the food.

Once your child has mastered some basic kitchen skills, ask, "What healthy ingredients would you like us to keep on hand for you?"

25 **Take control of clutter.** Do you get tired of picking up toys, coats and bikes? When the clutter got out of control in one family, they developed the "penalty box."

Actually, it's a closet with a lock on it. When things are left out past the time they should be picked up, they go into the "penalty box." Kids must do chores to redeem their belongings.

The best way to build responsibility in your child is to *give* your child responsibility. Your child will learn that actions have consequences.



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Published by:

**THE
PARENT**
INSTITUTE®

(800) 756-5525
www.parent-institute.com

Stock No:
(English) 303A
(Spanish) 403A