

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

Road to Responsibility



BY KIM DeMARCHI

Our job as parents, I believe, is not to do things for our children, but to build up strengths in them—strengths that will help them deal with the inevitable roadblocks and troubles life will one day throw in

their path. In this day and age, when “helicopter parenting” seems to be the norm, imagine “Preparing the child for the path, not the path for the child.”

Let’s take the quality of responsibility. All of us want our children to be responsible adults, but we sometimes, inadvertently, parent young children in a way that teaches just the opposite.

Here’s a typical scenario: A 2 year-old toddler comes into the kitchen and says, “I want to help.” Mom, who is in a hurry to get a meal on the table, says, “No, go along and play.” Fast forward a few years. Mom wants the now 10-year-old to help chop the carrots, and he says, “No, I’m busy playing.” He is doing exactly what he has been taught: to get out of the way so the adults can do it more quickly, more efficiently, and correctly.

We’ve all been there. But if we truly value the quality of responsibility, we may choose another approach. Instead of doing things for our children because it’s easier, or faster, or because we can do it “right”, we can teach responsibility by involving children in the tasks of daily life at home from a very young age. Yes, I’m talking about chores.

A recent Wall Street Journal article about children and chores echoed my feelings on the topic: “Parents today want their kids spending time on things that can bring them success, but ironically, we’ve stopped doing one thing that’s actually been a proven predictor of success—and that’s household chores,” says Richard Rende, a developmental psychologist in Paradise Valley, Ariz., and co-author of the recent book *Raising Can-Do Kids*.

Your children may learn more valuable skills and feel more pride of accomplishment by helping at home than they do from many of the sports, clubs, lessons and overscheduled activities. As the Wall Street Journal article notes, “Giving children chores at an early age helps to build a lasting sense of mastery, responsibility, and self-reliance.” Laundry may be more valuable than scouting, home maintenance more valuable than martial arts, or cooking more valuable than sports.

With most of my clients, I like to encourage parents to take something they currently do for their child that he is capable of doing for himself and give it back to him. Ask yourself, “What am I doing for my child this month that he may be ready to take responsibility for doing on his own?” This is not about punishment or because you don’t want to do things for your child. It’s about showing trust in your child’s ability, value for your child’s contribution, and desire to build competence and habits that will serve your child for a lifetime. Make sure you turn over things you know they can handle. A child can only take full responsibility for something he has the skills to do.

Think of it this way: If you always do things for your child that she is capable of doing for herself, you are taking away the chance for her to develop the skills and self-esteem that come from competence and contribution. You are robbing your children of this invaluable opportunity to learn by experience.

Want to get started on teaching your child to be responsible? Here’s a list of tried-and-true tips:

1. Give them responsibilities: Start small, start now. For example:

18 months old-3 years old - carry in newspaper and mail, take clothes out of dryer, help put groceries away, tear lettuce, scramble eggs, feed pets

4-6 years old - fold towels and washcloths, water plants, measure ingredients, carry in firewood, help pack lunches, sort white and dark clothes, give foot rub

7-10 years old - get herself up in the morning, load dishwasher, read recipes, change sheets on bed, read to younger siblings, wash and vacuum the car

11-15 years old - baby sit, cook meals, change light bulbs, make appointments, rsvp for parties, order out for family, mow lawn, wash windows, buy groceries

16-18 years old - run errands, help siblings with homework, take care of house and yard, help with family budgets, plan vacations, handle own debit card



something kids eventually need to learn how to do safely, not just be kept away from.

- 2. Ask for their help to contribute to you and the family.** It feels good to be of service to someone. Give your child the chance to be important and worthwhile. It could be preparing flowers for a guest who’s coming to visit, contributing to the menu planning, or straightening the shoes by the door. You want responsibility to be a personal strength, not just, say, knowing the proper way to fold the laundry.
- 3. Create opportunities for them to contribute to the community.** It could be formal, like volunteer work, or informal, like helping someone in the store who dropped something.
- 4. Be patient.** It takes patience to allow kids the time to try to figure out something that is challenging, and it takes confidence in their ability to persevere and tolerate frustration. You also need to remember to “take time for training”, as discussed in last month’s article.
- 5. Make it enjoyable.** No one likes a chore list, but there is often satisfaction in a job well done (or even the process). Put on music and do it along with them.
- 6. Let them make mistakes and learn from them.** Experience, especially experience that’s reflected on, is a far more effective teacher than a parent could ever be.
- 7. Allow your child to take some risks.** Don’t automatically assume that she can’t do something. Using the stove, for example, is

8. Resist the urge to jump in and make it right. Teach children to clean up their own messes, from a spill to a missing homework assignment, and trust in their ability to find solutions to the messes they make. Supporting kids from a very young age to take responsibility for the results of their actions is a powerful lesson and one that will serve them well as adults.

Remember, you are supposed to be working yourself out of the job of parenting gradually. You can do it!

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Kim’s goal for you is to help reduce conflict, foster mutual respect, and create deeper communication and connections with your loved ones. She can be reached through www.EmpoweredParenting.com.