

# Psych Savvy

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## Children and Responsibility

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April, 1995

**Background** - Society today places a high priority on responsibility in children. However, with the conflicting advice offered in books, magazines, and newspaper columns, parents may feel confused as to exactly what a responsible child is, and what, if anything, can be done to encourage responsibility in children.

Responsibility can be thought of as respect for the rights of others and personal accountability for one's actions. Responsible children use their own resources, confidence, and judgment to make decisions, act independently, consider the effect their actions have on others and meet their own needs without interfering with the rights of others.

**Development** - It is necessary to differentiate between typical childish behavior and truly irresponsible actions. All children, at times, engage in silly, selfish, and irresponsible behaviors. In order to determine if a real problem exists, the following guidelines should be considered in evaluating a child's general behavior:

*How often is this behavior a problem?* Does the concerning behavior predominate the child's actions, or is there only an occasional lapse in responsibility? To what degree is the irresponsible behavior upsetting the home routine or interfering with classroom structure? Most school age children forget an assignment once in a while, but a daily or weekly problem could signal trouble in accepting work responsibilities. Every adolescent occasionally ignores an assigned chore; but a parent is appropriately concerned if the garbage is rarely taken out, or the lawn is never mowed. Does the behavior change when these concerns are brought to the child's attention? If a child's lack of attention to rules or assignments is the subject of frequent complaints from teachers, friends, or parents, the situation warrants further investigation.

*Does the child have an opportunity to be responsible?* Children can only demonstrate responsible behavior if they are given the chance. Parents must be willing to allow children the freedom to make choices, demonstrate judgment, and learn from their mistakes. Does the child have an opportunity to contribute to the running of the household, remember belongings, structure time, plan activities, demonstrate preferences in clothing and food?

*Are expectations appropriate?* The natural progression of children's intellectual, physical, and emotional growth allows for increasing acceptance of responsibility. It is very important that the expectations placed on children match their abilities. Are situational demands within the child's capabilities? Have expectations been communicated clearly? Following are some examples of tasks most children can accept at a given age:

### Preschooler

- can usually clean up toys with some direction or assistance
- can be expected to sit and play independently for short periods of time
- can often select clothes and dress themselves with a little verbal or physical assistance
- can begin to help with household chores such as setting the table, picking up soiled clothes, etc.
- can be expected to follow safety rules with occasional reminders

## **Early school age**

- can often follow rules of group games
- can express anger without hitting most of the time
- remembers to attend to personal belongings (bring home gloves, books, etc.) with little reminding
- does simple chores independently (clears table, puts belongings away)
- can care for hygiene and dressing needs

## **Intermediate school age**

- can complete assignments independently
- can organize personal time to fit in homework, play time, etc.
- help with household chores on a daily basis
- respects personal property of others

## **Adolescents**

- can evaluate and respond when extra help is needed around the house
- follows curfew rules, lets parent know change in plans, etc.
- developing sexual responsibility and respects personal rights of others
- developing increasing awareness of long-term life planning, career exploration

## **WHAT CAN I DO AS A PARENT?**

- *Model appropriate, responsible behavior:* Set an example of respect for self and others, be on time for appointments, return extra change to a cashier, finish necessary chores before relaxing, speak respectfully to children, handle anger appropriately.
- *Communicate effectively:* Expectations and rules should be stated clearly and positively to children. The reason for rules should be given so children develop an awareness of their helpfulness and the respect they gain when acting responsibly.
- *Allow children to set goals, make choices, and solve problems:* Children need experience in being responsible decision-makers. Involve them in setting household maintenance goals and chores. These goals can be displayed in a chart or contract. Encourage children's responsible participation in family meetings by presenting them with acceptable choices in food and clothing selection, time management, television offerings, room decoration, free-time activities, and vacation choices.
- *Allow for natural and logical consequences:* Children who do not act responsibly should experience the effect of their actions. If homework is not done, a television show will be missed so the assignment can be completed before bed. If toys are not put away, they may be taken until the child can care for them better. Adolescents not helping with laundry chores may find no clean clothes to wear to a party. Children unwilling to help with cooking and cleaning may find dinner will be late and favorite activities will be missed to allow them time to clear dishes. A child dawdling each morning may miss the bus and have to walk to school or be driven in late and expected to make-up missing work.

### **Resources:**

- Byre, L. and Byre, R. (1994). Teaching Your Children Responsibility.
- Byre, L. and Byre, R. (1994). Teaching Your Children Values.
- Dinkmeyer, D. (1990). Parenting Teenagers.
- Dinkmeyer, D. (1989). Parenting Young Children.
- Dinkmeyer, D. and McKay, G. (1993). Raising a Responsible Child.
- Nelsen, J. (1993). Positive Discipline A to Z: 1001 Solutions to Everyday Problems.
- Rosemond, J. (1994). Parent Power.
- Shure, M. (1994). Raising a Thinking Child.