

Reviving Responsibility

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How often do we hear, “I wish my children acted more responsibly?” or “She’s so irresponsible. I have to do everything for her.” Or “At his age I had to act responsibly. I didn’t have any choice.” What has happened in an era when children have more privileges, opportunities and freedoms than ever before but often show little inclination towards responsible action? Many of us grew up with too much responsibility and little freedom while today’s parents are witnessing, often encouraging, children with little responsibility and too much freedom to have and do whatever they desire.

Responsibility is the ability to make choices and accept the consequences of those choices. It involves recognizing and accepting limits and understanding the relationship between cause and effect. Acts of responsible behaviour are appropriately rewarded with increased freedom. In the adult work world those who demonstrate responsible behaviour are often awarded bonuses, promotions or additional privileges. At minimum, they receive less management supervision. They earn these rights and freedoms.

Increased responsible behaviour -----Increased freedom
Decreased responsible behaviour----- Decreased freedom

Freedom without responsibility can lead to inconsiderate behaviour and an attitude of privilege. Then one day an adult yells out, “*You brat!*” In contrast responsibility without freedom can lead to resentment and conflict. Sometimes an oldest child is expected to look after the younger children, be a good example and maintain the *good behaviour* line, without receiving deserved acknowledgement and freedom to make some independent choices such as curfew or allowance spending.

Too often parents actually *rob* their children of their ability to act responsibly. They act more like servants than family leaders. They block their children from the responsibility and consequences for their choices. I heard a teacher describe parents who *fly* into schools with their children’s forgotten lunches—*helicopter parents*. Helicopter parents fly to the rescue rather than allowing their darlings to feel a hunger pang or learn to negotiate with a friend for a bite of peanut butter sandwich. Other rescues may involve over-involvement with homework, purchasing frivolous items to appease a whine and doing for their children tasks for which they have the competence.

Here is a list of ways to foster responsibility:

1. Acknowledge when children demonstrate responsible behaviour. Support responsibility by using methods that are compatible with learning styles. For children with an auditory preference give lots of verbal encouragement and recognition. For the visually oriented child leave notes of appreciation.
2. Allow children to experience no danger outcomes without rescuing. This is called Natural Consequences. For example if they lose or break something don't immediately replace it. Offer to help them create a solution for *their* problem.
3. Arrange for age appropriate logical consequences. Check that children understand what you are prepared to do and not do. "Only if you are in your pajamas by 8 pm will I read you a bed time story." Always follow through. Be one person your children can count on to keep commitments. You, the parent, have a responsibility to be consistently reliable.
4. Teach children that acting responsibly creates successful results. Acknowledge responsibility by pointing out when your children
 - do their chores. Point out to children that their contribution to the family makes a difference, "When you empty the dishwasher I feel happier making dinner."
 - own and accept their feelings. "Thank you for telling me that you feel frustrated that you must do your homework before playing. That helps me understand what is going for you. What can I do to help you act responsibly and get it done?"
 - are sensitive to others. "Thank you for waiting while Joey needed my attention. It was easier to calm him down and now I have time for you."
 - take care of property. "Thank you for getting your bike out of the rain otherwise it may have rusted."
 - are obedient to our community laws. "Thank you for watching until the light turned green before walking across the street. I like how you keep yourself safe."
 - solve problems. "I liked how you solved your disagreement with Joey by offering to take a turn. Cooperation helps bring peace to our home and world. Hey, you're a peace maker!"
 - accept the consequences of their decisions. "I think you learned a lot from deciding to talk disrespectfully to your teacher and serving your school detention. What do you think you learned? What will you do differently tomorrow?"

- make choices based on what is appropriate and acceptable, not for the reason of avoiding punishment. “Thank you for telling me the truth about how my flower vase was broken. It helps me to trust you.”
5. Resign from doing for your children what they can do for themselves. When we take over for others we can unintentionally *rob* them of feeling competent. Remember when toddlers first learn to put on their own shoes; they don’t want any help, even when it takes a loooooong time? But what happens? Children become accustomed to having a servant. But what do we really want? Hopefully, children who act responsibly. Some parents have written a resignation letter from their role as *child servants*.

Dear Joey,

For too long I have accepted more responsibility for your homework than you. I want to apologize for taking over and giving you the message that you are not competent. Actually you are a bright and capable young man. I hope you believe that. To prove that I mean what I am writing, I am resigning from involvement with your homework. I am available if you would like help with it. Anytime. Being there for you will never change. But, from now on you are in charge.

Maybe, you’re thinking, “I’m so used to Mom nagging me about my homework and study, it will be hard.” It might be. I’d be glad to help you figure out a plan but that is up to you. If you don’t pass the year, I will be OK with you attending summer school. I trust you to make the best decision for you.

Love, Mom

Will children want to lose their servants waiting on them? Not necessarily. They may even feel angry and up the anti to invite you back into Kathy Lynn, author of *Who’s in Charge Anyway?* states, “If your kids don’t sometimes hate you, you’re not doing your job: the touch work of parenting.”

In our family we discovered that children 10-years-old can put away their laundry, prepare their own breakfast, pack their own lunch, and prepare a dinner a week for the family. By 12-years-old they can typically look after their own laundry and handle a clothing and necessity allowance.

As parent education guru Barbara Colorosa says, “What (children) need is support, explanation, encouragement, opportunities to be responsible, and invitations to think for themselves.”

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