



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **A Parent Guide for Difficult Behaviors, Part 3 IRRESPONSIBILITY**

Dear Parent,

If there existed a dictionary of life, responsibility would be defined as a key element of character, moral development, self-esteem, identity formation, and highly effective people. Responsibility is linked to success, self-respect and life-giving relationships. Responsible people are dependable; they keep their commitments; they establish a pattern of completing tasks to the best of their ability; they set goals, determine the steps needed to reach their goals, manage time wisely, follow through, and meet deadlines. Actually, research indicates that successful students complete projects ahead of time. Responsible persons honor obligations.

Parents hope for responsible children although family reality is sometimes characterized by a child who waits until bedtime to announce that she needs a particular store-bought item for tomorrow's class; or the boy who forgets to bring to school the homework project that he did, indeed, finish at home; or the girl who forgot to bring home the school textbook needed for homework; or the child who failed to turn in the permission slip for the class field trip. Occasional slip-ups are human and can prove to be valuable learning experiences when parents allow natural or logical consequences to run their course. A pattern of such slip-ups, however, leads to frustration, anger, disappointment in self, and feelings of inferiority or shame. Patterns of forgetting, procrastinating, being overdue on assignments, taking incomplete notes during class, being unprepared for tests, being lazy or apathetic around the house, and giving more time to hobbies than to schoolwork push parents and others to view a child as irresponsible.

### **RESPONSIBILITY INDEX**

What is the responsibility index of your child? Reflect on the pattern of your child's behavior over the past month. Would the vocabulary terms of responsibility or irresponsibility best describe her behavior or his choices? Words associated with the concept of responsibility include the following terms: accountable, answerable, dependable, follow through, liable, obligated, reliable, trustworthy. Synonyms for irresponsibility include: arbitrary, careless, flighty, fluctuating, immature, irresolute, lax, negligent, purposeless, reckless, thoughtless, unaccountable, unanswerable, unreliable, unsteady.

### **RESPONSIBILITY TAUGHT AND CAUGHT**

Responsibility is an acquired skill. It can be taught and irresponsibility can be remediated and redirected. Responsibility, *the ability to respond*, requires that we pay attention and then attend to what we notice. Dr. Thomas Lickona (1991), author of the book *Educating for Character*, explained that responsibility "means orienting toward others, paying attention to them, and actively responding to their needs. Responsibility emphasizes our positive obligations to care for each other . . . in the family, at school, in the workplace -- to the best of our ability" (pp. 44-45). Responsibility "includes taking care of self and others, fulfilling our obligations, contributing to our communities, alleviating suffering, and building a better world" (p. 68). Although caring for my own bedroom, schoolwork, and interests are characteristics of responsibility, their focus is self-serving. It is necessary to broaden my outlook and outreach in order to grow into a responsible, moral person.

Beyond paying attention to my own needs, responsibility needs to be other-centered in order to view myself as an essential member of my family and society. Responsibility gives a child a sense of importance and maturity. Typical other-oriented responsibilities like reading to a younger brother, serving as commissioner of trash for the family, setting the table or doing the dishes, caring for a neighbor's pet, mowing lawns, or going to the store on a regular basis for an elderly neighbor or grandparent develop autonomy, initiative, and industry within the soul of a child that allows him to view himself as significant, needed, and competent. Involvement in school, church or civic projects, walk-a-thons, or fund-raising opens a child a sense of obligation to the community and stretches her beyond self-absorption and isolation.

Parent example and intervention is necessary to teach responsibility and to re-direct irresponsibility. Parents need to balance the capability of the child with the responsibility they ask of the child. Age, mental alertness and capacity, experience, social and physical skills or levels of development need to be figured into any expectation placed upon the child. When we ask more of a child than he is capable of delivering, we frustrate him and give him messages of unworthiness or inferiority. When we ask too little of him, we insult him and give him the message that we do not think of him as capable. Responsibility balanced with ability gives a child a sense of importance, maturity,

and ownership. "Success begets success" and growth in responsibility follows.

Start responsibility training early. As soon as a child is capable of picking up her toys, involve her in the clean up process. Whatever a child can do for himself let him do it and encourage his efforts. Be yourself a good example of reliability, follow through, and the value of responsibility. Give your child the freedom to make mistakes. Respond calmly to errors and involve the child in correcting the mistake. Demonstrate consistently that you believe that effort is more important than results. Encourage effort which is within the control of the child; results are not always within his control.

## PARENTING PRACTICES

A time-honored adage best defines the process for becoming responsible: "We learn to do by doing." May the suggestions that follow affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine ways that you can promote a sense of responsibility within your child.

- **Choice and Consequence Conversations:** Ask each family member to voice one recent example of a personal choice made and the natural consequence experienced. For example, "I chose to take a walk after lunch today. It energized me for the afternoon." "I chose to wait until today to go to the library. Now I am going to be stressed and I will have to miss my favorite TV show to finish my project."

- **POSITIVE WORD ASSOCIATION:** Regularly make positive associations with the term *responsibility*. For example, "Who is responsible for this creative dessert?" "Who was responsible for closing the windows during the storm?" "Who was responsible for picking out the video that we enjoyed last night?"

- **FAMILY CHORES:** Schedule "family work time", a specific time when all members of the family pitch in to improve the condition of the house. Make a job chart that records what responsibilities are expected and time expectations. Create job charts during vacation time, too.

- **TIME CHARTS:** Create a time chart of days and blocks of time during each day. With your child fill in the schedule to balance work, play and quiet time. Be specific. Help your child to stick to it for one day. Repeat day by day. When your child has comfortable mastery of a one day schedule, extend the time chart for one week. Affirm her accomplishments, show interest in her efforts, regardless of the results. Create a new time chart for the following week. Eventually have your child create her own time charts.

- **GOAL SETTING:** Use a calendar to teach goal setting skills and time management skills, first on a daily basis, and then on a weekly basis and eventually on a long range basis. Help your child to name his goal and list the specific tasks needed to achieve the goal. Make a realistic time assignment for each task. Check on task completion step by step. Once your child demonstrates a comfortable mastery of the process, let him create his own calendar and merely oversee it.

## TO PREPARE SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN FOR SUCCESS PRACTICE THE FOLLOWING SUGGESTIONS:

- **STUDY PLAN:** Establish a plan that accounts for place, time, effective study environment and supervision of homework.

- **TRACK ASSIGNMENTS:** Equip her with a way to record homework assignments. Monitor this process closely until she has a comfortable mastery of tracking assignments. Continue to spot check.

- **SCHOOL BOX:** Give each child a large cardboard box in which to place everything related to school: book bag, posters, lunch, gym shoes, etc. Insist that all school matters from homework, to permission slip, to athletic uniform be stored in the box. The box should be empty when your child leaves home in the morning.

- **FAMILY CALENDAR:** Maintain a family calendar on which all deadlines are listed. List family functions which

are priorities and around which all other activities are scheduled. Teach your child to consult the calendar daily at a routine time.

- **ORGANIZE LOCKER & DESK:** If your child has a locker at school teach him how to organize his books for efficient recognition. The same is true for his desk at school. If space permits, turn books with the labeled spine facing him. Self-stick notes made during class and placed on the spine can serve as reminders of assignments for the day and books needed for home.

- **LOOSE PAPERS:** Store loose papers in an eight-pocket portfolio. Label each pocket for a separate subject. Teach your child to file test papers, worksheets, etc. in the appropriate subject pocket. Regularly examine the work and clean out the pockets.

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