

## Responsibility: How to Teach It

**T**revor, twelve years old, is a nice boy, pleasant, but laid back and irresponsible. He has been assigned chores but he forgets half the time. His mother asks, “How can I teach him to be responsible? Does assigning chores teach children responsibility?” “No,” says Dr. Haim G. Ginott. “The plain fact is that responsibility cannot be imposed. It can only grow from within, fed and directed by values absorbed at home and in the community.” *Between Parent and Child*, pp. 80. If responsibility is imposed it is often resisted and resented. Our goal is to help children choose to be faithful, to want to assume their share of home duties.

Parents must model responsibility. Dad said to Tom, “I promised your mother that I would call home for the grocery list.” Tom observes that his father takes responsibility seriously. Tom will gradually adopt this attitude and modify his behavior. We should allow children to feel their feelings. “I know you would rather play than do the dishes, Nancy. It is hard to deny our feelings. Sometimes I don’t feel like getting dinner, but I have a hungry family to feed so I do what needs to be done. I guess it’s called self-denial. Thank you for doing the dishes cheerfully, Nancy.” Mother responded to Nancy’s feelings. She did not nag or ridicule. Feelings are like a river. They cannot be denied or brushed aside. Parents should respect feelings. This will motivate the child to want to cooperate and to assume responsibilities.

Responsibility is an important part of character development. Character training depends much on relationships. If you are loving and caring, your children will be cooperative. Dan came home from school looking downcast and glum. His Dad said, “It is obvious that something disappointing has happened at school today. If you want to share, I’m glad to listen.” Dan’s father is not prying, he is simply wanting to be supportive. Ginott says, “If he lives with criticism, he does not learn responsibility. . . . There is only one way in which we can win: by winning the child over.” *Ibid*, pp. 84, 85.

Listening to children with sensitivity helps greatly to bridge the gape. George hates his chores but he does them because he knows his dad values and loves him. George’s father never criticizes. He occasionally says things like: “You did a fine job washing the car. It looks really nice. Thank you!” “When parents listen with sensitivity, suspend cutting comments, and state their feelings and requirements without insult, a process of change is initiated in the child. . . . A sense of responsibility is

attained by each child through his own efforts and experience.” *Ibid*, p. 86. Affirmation works wonders.

Teaching responsibility can begin very early in life. It begins by offering choices. Responsibility is developed by autonomy. Give children as many choices as possible — food, clothing, toys, etc.

What about home work? Is it the parent’s responsibility or the child’s? If you assume this responsibility, it will be yours forever. Convey to your child that homework is strictly *his* responsibility. “Karen, homework for you is like my job to me.” Parents should set a regular time for homework in the family schedule. Set a minimum amount of time for study each night. A good rule is to multiply the child’s grade by ten minutes — a fourth grader would study 40 minutes each evening. Help your child keep a homework log of assignments and a calendar of deadlines. Provide a desk or table, adequate lighting, and a comfortable chair. Avoid threats and nagging. “Max, you are responsible for your success or failure in life. I will always be here to help you and encourage you, but you must make your own decisions.”

The responsible use of money is one of the most valuable skills you can impart. The best method of teaching money management is giving your child an allowance. Ellen White says, “Let him learn the right use of money by using it.” *Child Guidance*, p. 136. The Adams family were walking through a shopping mall. “Dad, can I borrow \$5.00? I just saw a model airplane that I have been looking for. I’ll pay you back.” “Ernie, you just got your allowance last Tuesday.” “But I spent it all on model airplanes. Please, Dad!” “But Ernie you know our policy is *not to loan money*. I am very sorry. I guess you will have to learn to live within your income.” Teaching children how to handle money as stewards of God’s gifts should begin very early. Most authorities agree that by the time a child is six year old and in the in first grade, he is ready to learn how to manage money. It is best not to withhold an allowance as a penalty for misbehavior. Remember, an allowance is a teaching device. Talk about credit cards — their use and abuse. Encourage your children to earn money by babysitting, lawn care, etc. But do not pay for regular household chores. We all have a responsibility for the up-keep of the home. Talk about these issues in your regular family council meeting. Explain where money comes from and emphasize that it has to be earned.

Teaching children responsibility takes time and much patience. “A sense of responsibility is attained by each child through his own efforts and experience.” *Ginott*, p. 86. Much prayer and patience will pay off in responsible behavior by our children.