



## **The Fourth “R”: Responsibility**

While your children are learning readin', writin', and 'rithmetic in school, they can and should be learning the most important “R” at home - responsibility. Teaching children to be responsible for themselves and others is perhaps one of the most important goals of parenting. Children who develop a sense of responsibility and who are able to fulfill their responsibilities successfully also develop a positive self-image and the self-confidence to tackle more challenging tasks.

Raising a responsible child is a parent's responsibility. It requires that parents provide a positive role model for cooperation and that parents are willing to work with the child and help the child master self-care, family chores and schoolwork. Parents need to give responsibilities in proportion to a child's age and ability, to be clear about their expectations and to give children real choices that promote decision-making and self-direction.

Developing a sense of responsibility and learning the skills needed to fulfill one's obligations can start early. Your toddler can learn how to put away toys and clean up small spills. Show, don't tell, your toddler how to put away her toys. Work together to demonstrate cooperation and to insure satisfactory completion of the task. Eventually, your preschooler will learn how to do many self-care duties: bathing, brushing her teeth, choosing her clothes to wear, dressing herself and much more as her physical and mental abilities allow. She can also learn to contribute to family chores by setting or clearing the table, sorting laundry or taking care of pets. Be sure to positively reinforce correct behavior, but don't overdo praise and rewards. Children need to learn that following through with responsibilities and becoming responsible is its own reward and helps them become competent and independent persons.

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Responsibilities for school-age children increase. In addition to self-care and family chores, school children have a responsibility to complete their schoolwork and homework in a satisfactory fashion. As school-age children become more independent, they should be given more responsibility for deciding about and managing their own personal resources such as allowances, free time and friendships. Instead of dictating rules and responsibilities with older elementary children and pre-teens, parents would be wise to discuss and negotiate their son or daughter's role in the family. While expectations and limits are still needed, these cannot be imposed if the parent wants to insure ongoing cooperation. And, after all, it is cooperation; not compliance, we are seeking.

Raising a responsible teen will not happen overnight. Unless your son or daughter has acquired a sense of responsibility and been given a responsible role in the family, you can expect many battles over just about everything. Don't try to "win" these battles since either you or your teen will end up losing and feeling resentful. Instead, discuss your concerns and expectations in a calm, mature manner. Be clear about the consequences of irresponsible behavior or what will happen if your teen does not complete homework assignments or fails to clean his room. Let your teen know how you will help and what you will not do under any circumstances (like vacuum his room after a month's accumulation of dust bunnies). By the teenage years, your son or daughter should be completely in charge of some aspects of his or her life like grooming, schoolwork, employment responsibilities and keeping his or her bedroom in an acceptable condition.

Like teachers trying to teach kids the three "R's", parents need to constantly plan, motivate and evaluate in order to teach their children the fourth "R": responsibility.

Source: Tim Jahn, Human Development Specialist, at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.