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**South Brunswick Public Schools
EPIC Program**



10 Great Ways to Teach Children Responsibility

One of a series of Parent Guides from



Parent Guide

10 Great Ways to Teach Children **Responsibility**

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Introduction

A child who understands and accepts responsibility will do better in school and in life, and home is the very best place to learn it. This Parent Guide looks at 10 of the very best things parents can do to build this vital trait.

“The willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life is the source from which self-respect springs.”
—Joan Didion

1

Set the example—and the standard—for responsible behavior

Children learn by example. They are much more likely to do as you do than as you say. Don’t just tell your child that he* needs to be more responsible—show him how it’s done.

Find the time to follow through on those little everyday commitments you have made. Make that trip to the mall with your child that you promised to take. Be on time for appointments. Finish your own chores. Set aside some time to volunteer at school or to attend a parent organization meeting. Be sure to vote in the next election (and take your child with you when you do).

Get involved in a community project. And help your child see that he has a responsibility to the community, too. Together, choose something you can do as a family—take part in a neighborhood cleanup or collect food for the local food bank, for example.

Assign responsibility gradually

2

There is no magic age at which children suddenly “become” responsible. They learn about being responsible gradually—in much the same way that they learn to walk and talk:

- **Preschoolers** can begin taking responsibility for putting their dirty clothes in the hamper and putting their toys away after playing with them.
- **Kindergarteners** should be ready to help set the table for dinner, make their beds and keep the pet’s water dish filled.
- **Elementary schoolers** can fold and put away laundry, help clean the house and even help prepare meals.
- **Secondary schoolers** can take on new responsibilities around the house each year until—as older teens—they can be expected to help out by doing many of the things that any adult would do.

Unless she learns how to take on increasing amounts of responsibility at home, your child will be totally unprepared to handle the responsibilities she will face in college or at work.

**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

3

Give your child responsibility

One of the best ways to help children learn to be responsible is to give them responsibilities of their own. For example:

- **Create a chore list.** Assign age-appropriate tasks that your child can do herself. Add responsibilities as he becomes more mature.
- **Involve your child in the process.** Let her choose some of the jobs she would like to do.
- **Keep track of your own responsibilities** with a “to-do” list and encourage your child to make a list of her own as well.
- **Make time to help your child** learn to take responsibility. Don’t rush through explanations. Make sure she understands what she is supposed to do. Break new chores into smaller steps while she learns how to do the entire task.
- **Don’t re-do her work for her.** If she hasn’t done something correctly, show her how to do it again. Then, let her do it—by herself.
- **Allow your child to take some risks.** Don’t automatically assume that she can’t do something.
- **Be prepared for mistakes.** Talk about what went wrong and how your child can learn from the experience.
- **Praise your child when she demonstrates responsibility.** On the other hand, don’t nag or rescue her when she doesn’t. Let her learn what happens when she fails to complete school assignments, do her chores or honor her commitments.
- **Be patient.** According to research, it takes 21 repetitions for an action to become a habit.

Teach your child about choices ... and consequences

4

A big part of learning to be responsible involves learning to make good choices. And that takes practice. You can help your child learn about responsible decision-making by presenting him with plenty of opportunities to practice making acceptable choices. Even the youngest child can decide which shirt to wear, or whether he wants tomato or chicken soup for lunch, for example. Older children can decide which sport or other after-school activity they want to take part in, or whether they will do their homework before or after dinner.

It’s also important to help children understand that the choices they make—both good choices and bad choices—have consequences.

Talk with your child about how all choices have consequences. For example:

- **I chose to wait** until the last minute to do my research project. The result was that I did a poor job and got a low grade.
- **I chose to review** my vocabulary words for fifteen minutes a day this week. The result was that I got an A on my vocabulary quiz.

Use examples from your life in the discussion, too. For example, “I chose to sleep in today. The result was that I arrived to work late and felt rushed all morning.” Or, “I chose to pay my credit card bill on time. The result was that I didn’t have to pay an additional interest charge.”

This kind of discussion can help your child understand that all of us make choices every day, and that we must accept responsibility for the choices we make.

5

Praise responsibility

Keep in mind that it's just as important to reward your child's responsible behavior as it is to comment on her mistakes. In fact, it's even more important, because your praise and recognition means more to your child than just about anything else. Don't overdo it, however, or it can lose its impact. (The experts say the right balance is to compliment your child about three times as often as you criticize her.) Here are some other tips for using praise:

- **Be specific.** Tell your child exactly what you like about her behavior. "I appreciate your taking the trash out without being asked. I know that's not your favorite chore."
- **Notice effort.** Don't wait until your child completes a task to give praise. Comment on her improvement every step of the way.
- **Reminisce.** Every once in a while, mention a past accomplishment. For example, "Remember the first time you took Barkey for his afternoon walk? I think you were surprised at how happy that made him."
- **Chart success.** If your child is working on a specific goal—getting up, bathed, dressed and to the breakfast table without being prodded, for example—keep track of her progress. Make a simple weekly chart that lists each step in the process. Put a star or check mark under each step that she completes successfully.
- **Brag.** Occasionally, let your child overhear you talking about her accomplishments to others.
- **Give awards.** Words aren't the only form of praise. Try giving awards, such as the "Self-Starter Award." Each week, recognize the family member who took the most responsibility for doing things without being reminded.

Make it easy to remember ...

6

Don't expect your child to automatically remember his responsibilities. A good memory isn't something you're born with. It's a skill that is developed. And, like any skill, it gets better with practice.

Here are a few ways to help your child remember what he needs to do:

- **Try a large family calendar.** Keep one calendar for the entire family. Use different colors to keep track of each person's activities. Add things like major tests, big school projects and special family events. Help your child get in the habit of checking the calendar before and after school each day.
- **Put up a bulletin board.** Post it by the door. Post chore schedules and anything else your child needs to remember.
- **Teach him to stop at the door.** Before your child leaves for school, have him stop for a minute and ask himself, "Do I have everything I will need today?"

... but don't make it easy to forget

If your child continually forgets his homework, don't deliver it to him at school. And, if he forgot that a major project is due next week, don't jump right in to help him complete it. If you constantly come to your child's rescue and readily solve his problems for him, you are denying him the chance to learn how to take responsibility for his actions by experiencing the consequences that follow.

7

Use natural and logical consequences

Natural consequences require no parent action—the consequence just happens. The natural consequence of choosing to stay up too late on a school night is feeling tired and sleepy the next day, for example.

But some actions have no natural consequences. That's when parents need to step in and set up a logical consequence. If your child loses a library book and you require her to use her allowance to pay the replacement fee, that's a logical consequence.

There are several key points to remember about logical consequences:

- **They have a direct relationship** to the original action your child took—and your child must understand the connection.
- **They are respectful of your child.** Consequences should never involve embarrassing or humiliating your child.
- **They are reasonable**—to your child as well as to you.
- **They are enforced** consistently.

Help your child plan ahead

8

Ideally, by the time he becomes an adult, every child will have learned to think ahead about what he'll need to do to be prepared and organized. But this is something that children gradually become capable of as they get older. So until your child can understand why he should prepare for things in advance, give him routines so he at least learns how to be organized and prepared:

- **Together, decide on a special place** where your child can keep everything he takes to school. Explain that his final responsibility each evening is to put everything he will need for school the following day in that place. This includes books and supplies, completed homework assignments and special projects. Tell him that his final responsibility before he heads out the door each morning is to make sure he has everything he needs.
- **Make a list of everything** your child takes to school on a typical day. Post it by the mirror in his bathroom, on the refrigerator or by the front door. Use yellow self-stick notes to add special items, such as field trip permission slips.
- **Give your child an alarm clock.** Explain to him that he is responsible for getting himself up in the morning. Talk with him about the consequences that will occur if various members of the family don't get up on time in the morning (fights over shower time, traffic jams at the toaster, making other members of a carpool late).
- **Help your child focus on time** if he tends to dawdle while getting ready for bed. Make a tape or CD that contains several of his favorite songs—enough to last him through his bedtime routine. The music can help him pace himself as he prepares for the next day and brushes his teeth.

9

Be firm and consistent

Study after study has shown that the parents of successful, responsible children are consistent in what they do. Rules are enforced in a consistent manner. Consequences for poor choices are applied each and every time.

All youngsters will test you to find the limits. For example, the rule may be “No TV until all homework assignments are finished.” But if your child can sometimes talk you into letting him watch “just this one program first,” he has learned that the rule actually is “No TV until all homework assignments are finished—unless I can get my parents to change their minds.”

When you are firm and consistent, you are helping your child learn an important lesson: Being responsible and making good choices is a way of life.

Avoid the ‘overindulgent parent’ trap

10

It’s easy to overindulge for your child in the name of love—easing off on the rules when she gets angry or frustrated, jumping in to solve problems or provide help when she seems to be struggling, paying for those designer shoes after you told him she had to earn the money himself, etc. But helping out in the short run won’t help your child learn those important long-term lessons about responsibility.

Keep these points in mind when you’re tempted to help too much:

- **Allowing your child to solve** small problems on her own now will help her learn how to handle the bigger ones she will face later in life.
- **You’re not being unfair** when you don’t allow your child to give up on a task that’s proving to be difficult for her. You’re helping her learn how to persevere.
- **Every time your child completes a chore** (or a school assignment) completely on her own, she’s becoming stronger and more self-confident. And strong, self-confident people are responsible—and successful—people.
- **When you take over for your child** when she becomes frustrated with a task, you’re indirectly letting her know you don’t think she can do it. And that can undermine her self-confidence.
- **By giving your child responsibilities** around the house, you’re telling her that she is important. She has an important role to play in your family.
- **Even though she may complain**, your child will appreciate all those extras more (games, CDs, designer clothing, etc.) if she takes responsibility for buying them herself—by saving her allowance, doing extra chores, and keeping to a budget.

A responsible child is one others can count on. As you nurture responsibility in your child, you’re preparing him to be accountable for his actions, to keep his word, to try his best, and to own up if he makes a mistake.

And you’re laying a foundation for your child’s success in school, at work, in relationships and in life.

“If you want your children to keep their feet on the ground, put some responsibility on their shoulders.”
—Abigail van Buren

For More Information

Building Responsibility—How Do I Teach My Children to Be More Responsible?

by Beth Tucker
Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona
<http://ag.arizona.edu/pubs/family/az1037.html>

Children and Responsibility

by Cynthia M. Sheehan
National Association of School Psychologists
301-657-0270
www.nasponline.org

Raising a Responsible Child—How Parents Can Avoid Overindulgent Behavior and Nurture Healthy Children

by Elizabeth M. Ellis
Carol Publishing Group

The Parent Institute

1-800-756-5525
www.parent-institute.com

“Training Children in Responsibility, The Teaching Home”

by Joy Marie Dunlap
The Teaching Home
www.theteachinghome.com

What Kids Need to Succeed

by Peter L. Benson, Judy Gailbraith and Pamela Espeland
Free Spirit Publishing
1-800-735-7323
www.freespirit.com

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Family & Home Set

10 Great Ways to Teach Children Responsibility
25 Ways You Can Put the Power of Routines to Work for You and Your Child
52 Great Ways Families Can Spend Time Together

School Readiness—Set 1

Developmental Milestones for Preschool Children—Is My Child on Track?
Preparing Your Child for Reading Success—Birth to Age Five
How to Choose the Best Preschool or Day Care for Your Child

School Readiness—Set 2

Common Discipline Problems of Preschoolers and How to Deal With Them
37 Experiences Every Child Should Have Before Starting School
Getting Your Child Ready for Kindergarten

School Success—Set 1

The Road to Reading Success—Elementary School Years
Common Discipline Problems of Elementary School Children and How to Solve Them
31 Alternatives to TV and Video Games for Your Elementary School Child

School Success—Set 2

Give Your Child the Edge: Teachers' Top 10 Learning Secrets Parents Can Use
How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests
Helping Children Get Organized for Homework and Schoolwork

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Help Your Child Develop Good Learning Styles
How to Instill the Character Traits of Success in Your Child
Seven Proven Ways to Motivate Children to Do Better in School

When There is a Problem—Set 1

Help Your Child Deal With Bullies and Bullying
Help Your Child Deal With Peer Pressure
How to Help Your Struggling Student

Other Important Titles

Common Discipline Problems of Teenagers and How to Solve Them
What to Do If Your Child Has ADD/ADHD
Common Discipline Problems of Middle School Children and How to Solve Them
Making a Smooth Transition to Middle School

*For more information about these and other materials for
parents to encourage learning in their children:*

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