Helping Children Learn Responsibility

As children grow, they seek increasing independence. They want to make their own choices and control their own world. Children’s drive for independence begins in infancy and the process grows and continues until they are well into adulthood.

As parents, we often find it difficult to let go of our children’s hands and allow them to explore and learn for themselves. Parents should always provide reasonable safety for their children. But when we praise and encourage our children to explore and make choices we are supporting the development of their independence. Wise parents know how important it is for their children to make decisions.

**Allow opportunities for your child to make choices.** Begin with simple decisions, such as choosing a book to read before bedtime, and, over time, provide more opportunities for more complex choices and decisions. (See the unit on Giving Children Choices.) When your child begins to express a desire to do certain things on her own (such as dressing herself, filling her own plate, etc.), allow her to do these things. Help her out when she requests your help or she is obviously struggling with something. But give her the chance to make as many decisions for her own life as she is able to make.

**We can give our children opportunities to be responsible for household chores.** Choose chores that are appropriate for your child. Begin small with tasks like putting away their toys. As they follow through with what you expect them to do, give them opportunities to take on more responsibilities. The age of the child is an important factor. You cannot expect a five-year-old to be responsible for the same things as his twelve-year-old sister. Match the chores to the maturity and interests of the child.

**Model responsibility.** Children learn from what their parents do. Show your children that you are responsible through your decision making and your daily tasks. Keep the commitments you make to family members.

**Let your child experience the consequences of his choices and actions.** If your child promises to clean his room before dinner, make sure his room is clean before he sits down to eat. If he did not follow through with his commitment, he should expect a logical consequence, perhaps not being able to eat dinner until his room is clean. Your child should be aware that consequences are tied to their behavior. (See the unit Using Consequences to Help Children Learn.) When your child makes good choices, even in small things, notice and encourage him.

**Give your child support.** Let your child know that you are going to be there for her when she needs you. Even as adults we need some help to get us through our responsibilities. When a
child knows she has the support of her parents, she is more willing to take on responsibilities and explore the world.

Applications:

What kind of opportunities do you give your children to explore their independence? (Ex: encourage exploration, decision making, responsibilities, etc.)

Does your child have responsibilities at home (such as cleaning-up her room, setting the dinner table, taking out the trash, etc.)? If you child is not doing well with those responsibilities, does he or she need additional training or support? If your child is doing well, are you noticing and supporting the efforts?

How do you model responsibility for your children?

Do you try to protect your children from consequences or do you allow them to experience an appropriate discomfort from mistakes?

How have you given your children support this past week in their efforts to become responsible and independent?

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