

family development

Development of Responsibility

Extension Division

Virginia Polytechnic Institute

Publication 83

June 1968



Publication 83
Cooperative Extension Service
June 1968

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work,
Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the
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Children do not “naturally” develop responsibility. Neither are they “naturally” reluctant to accept it. The way they feel about responsibility and what they do with it are learned forms of attitude and behavior. For the most part, children adopt the sense of responsibility which is shown and encouraged by their parents.

Adults usually have one of 3 attitudes toward children and responsibility. They may feel that:

1. Children do not have either the ability or the desire to accept responsibility.
2. Children have the ability to carry out responsibility but have no desire to accept it.
3. Children need responsibility, and are both able and willing to carry it out.

The parent’s attitude is important because it affects the way he acts toward his child. Do you know what your own attitude is? Let’s find out. Check below the response you would most likely make to the following situations.

Your 4-year-old daughter asks you to let her wash the dishes. You would probably answer:

“Not now, some other time. I’m in a hurry.”

“O.K., let’s do it together.”

“No, you’ll just make a big mess.”

“All right, but for goodness’ sake, be careful.”

Your 4-year-old sons refuses to pick up his toys before going to bed. You would most likely think to yourself:

“I guess I’ll have to pick them up myself.”

“Well, I’ll just let them stay on the floor.”

“Young man, you’re going to do it if it kills us both”

“Maybe he will pick them up if I help him.”

Now, let’s check to see what your attitude is toward children and responsibility. Did your response ignore the child or deny him the opportunity to work? If so, you probably feel that children

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are unable and unwilling to accept responsibility. If, by your response, you would attempt to force the child or to stand guard over him, you probably feel that children are able to accept responsibility, but are unwilling to do so on their own initiative.

On the other hand, if your response were to offer encouragement and to express confidence, you probably have the third attitude, that children need responsibility, desire it, and have the ability to accept it.

Before we say anything else about how responsibility is developed, we should decide what it is. If you say about someone, "he is a responsible person," or "he handles responsibility well," what are you saying about him? What makes up responsibility, anyway?

Responsibility seems to involve 2 important elements--(1) the way a person feels about himself, and (2) the way he feels toward other people. For a person to accept responsibility and be able to handle it, he must feel this about himself.

- (a) I am able to do it. My knowledge and skills are equal to the task.
- (b) I can afford to trust my own judgment. Responsibility always involves judgment, the ability to make the right decisions about situations as they arise.
- (c) I like having responsibility. It gives me a sense of importance and worth. I am the equal of other people.
- (d) I am not afraid of failure. It is not necessary for me to always succeed in order for me to be satisfied with myself.

This attitude involves what is known as the self concept, the way an individual thinks and feels about himself. Those who shy away from responsibility are the ones who are never quite sure that they are as smart as other people, or as skillful, or as likeable. In almost every case, responsibility involves consideration for other people and relationships with other people. It is therefore necessary for a person to have a good feeling about himself before he can be interested in others.

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For a child to accept responsibility, he must also feel this way about others:

- (a) I like other people, therefore, I enjoy doing things that will help others and show my like for them.
- (b) Other people like me. They are willing to trust me and will not stop liking me if I fail.
- (c) Other people depend on me. We need each other, and can cooperate by accepting responsibility in limited areas.

If these 2 elements are present in the acceptance of responsibility, then it becomes important to know how they can be encouraged. Parents can help by remembering and practicing a few simple guidelines.

1. Believe in the child's ability. Parents who are always afraid that children are too young, or too weak, or too clumsy, or too careless probably feel that way about themselves and try to put their fears off on the child. Of course, children have to grow in responsibility, but the most feeble attempts can be rewarded, and encouraged. If mother and daddy really believe their child can do something, the child will come to feel that way about himself too.
2. Give the child an opportunity to exercise responsibility. Practice is necessary to learning. When a child feeds himself, dresses himself, or does any task which brings him satisfaction, he learns that becoming self-reliant is worth the effort. This attitude can grow only when adults have the patience to let him make his fumbling experiments. It may mean more work for the parent in the long run or that the parent will have to show patience and re-do the job afterward. If parents were more willing to provide opportunity for daughters to learn how to cook there would be fewer jokes about a bride's skill in the kitchen. When you do your child's work for him, what are you teaching?
3. Allow for failure and imperfection. By overemphasizing errors or by blaming a child for mistakes, parents may train him to give up rather than to excel. Children are no more perfect

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than adults. We sometimes forget to carry out important responsibilities. We can, therefore, be tolerant when children forget to put away bicycles or to feed the dog. If Bill hangs his trousers up by one leg, he has accepted more responsibility than if he had left them on the floor. There are degrees of responsibility and no one starts at the highest point.

4. Provide a choice for the child. All jobs are not pleasant and children may balk at some things expected of them. If they have absolutely no choice about what they must do, their attitude may easily be more one of frustration and rebellion than of satisfaction and cooperation. Letting a child choose for himself what job he wants is only another opportunity to exercise responsibility.
5. Be a good model for the child. How do I discharge my adult responsibility--with complaining, fussing, and accusations? Do I talk about what I have to do, or what needs to be done? What is the difference? Do parents argue before the child about who should do the grocery shopping? Parents don't have to pretend that everything they do is fun. But they should convey to the child the ideas that responsible people take the bitter with the sweet.
6. Let the child make decisions. Involve the child in family decision-making. When the child's opinion is considered, he sees that his judgment is appreciated and comes to value his responsible role in the family. Every child can, under many circumstances, decide which clothes he will wear, or what, where, and with whom he will play on a given day. Older children can decide which clothes to buy, or which courses to elect in school. If children are really given the right to decide, they enjoy a sense of freedom and importance, and are more willing to comply when they can not have a choice.
7. Let him learn to take the consequences. Responsibility involves not only the willingness and ability to do something, but willingness to accept the results. When John overspends his allowance by irresponsible purchasing, parents are not teaching responsibility by stepping in and providing new and unexpected resources.
8. Reward accomplishments by praise and recognition. It is still

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possible to catch more flies with sugar than with vinegar. When a child has demonstrated reliability, he should be encouraged by verbal praise and by the highest form of recognition--being given an even wider area of responsibility. It does little good to praise a child with words without backing the compliment with a demonstration of trust.

Many children perform household tasks regularly and satisfactorily, but without developing responsibility. They may be doing chores because they are afraid not to, or because of the pressures parents exert upon them.

For example, a high school student may study because his father "sits" on him every night until his homework has been completed. When he goes away to college and his father is not around, what kind of studying will he do? This points out one of the most important aspects of responsibility--it is something which is built up from within a person, not forced on him from without.

Given the right opportunities and exposed to adequate examples, most children develop a good sense of social cooperation. They learn to get along with others by cooperating with them. At the root of this harmony is the feeling that one has an obligation to act in a certain way under certain circumstances, not only because of its effect upon himself, but because of the effect upon others. This is responsibility. Because it is so important to please others, almost every child wants to develop responsibility. Let's give him the chance!