

Developing responsibility in kids

• POSITIVE PARENTING



by Michael Grose

Many parents ask me how they can develop responsibility in their kids. The answer is simple – give responsibility to them! Let them feed the family pet, empty the dishwasher, clean up the living area at the end of the day. Most kids rise to a real challenge when it's sincerely given, and backed by realistic expectations.

We tend to give responsibility to the kids who don't need it – the easy kids. But we often ignore the kids in our family who really would benefit from having some trust – the difficult kids, those that require following up. Sometimes the extra parenting work they require can seem all too much.

Belong through contribution

Kids belong in two ways in families – they either belong due to their positive contribution or they belong through poor behaviour. The family pest has as much cache as the responsible child – their parents certainly know they are around!

It makes sense for parents to work hard to provide opportunities for kids to contribute to their family so they feel valued for what they bring to their family, rather than for what they take.

Here are five practical tips to promote a sense of responsibility in your kids:

1. Start from an early age. Children as young as three are keen to help and take some responsibility but we often push them away and say, 'You can help when you're older.' Train your kids from a young age to make a contribution so it becomes habit-forming. Remember, not every child will help equally. If your children are school-aged and do very little to help, then start with a few jobs each day and gradually increase the number.
2. Give kids responsibility that scares or surprises you. A neighbour gets her four year old to unpack her dishwasher each morning, plates and all. Another parent I know gets her five year old to help her younger sister get her breakfast each morning. Another gives over the weekly garbage to ten year old with no reminders whatsoever. In each case, the kids rise to the challenge set by their parents. Give your child or teenager something that makes you think, 'NO WAY!' He can't do that! Kids will often surprise adults with what they can do.
3. Make sure the responsibility is real. Setting the table, making beds, tidying rooms are jobs that others benefit from. Giving kids jobs because you think it's good for them just don't cut it with kids. However giving jobs that others rely on teaches them that their help is needed.
4. If a child forgets then no one else does the task. If a child doesn't empty the dishwasher then it still there when they come home from school. Sounds tough but that's how the real world operates. When you empty it, it becomes your responsibility. When we're time-strapped it's usually easier to do kids' jobs for them. Nothing wrong with this once in a while as we help each other out in families. However, if you are always doing a child's job then it may as well be yours.

5. Place help and responsibility on a roster. The use of rosters has the advantage of placing responsibility on to kids and takes you out of the picture. Remind them to check the roster, not to do their jobs! It's a subtle but important difference.

Many parents call this type of responsibility 'jobs' or 'chores'. I prefer to call it 'help'. It's just a little rebranding, but it reflects what it's about.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including *Thriving!* and the best-selling *Why First Borns Rule the World* and *Last Borns Want to Change It*, and his latest release *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children*.