**Teaching Responsibility to Your Children**

**Source-** centerforparentingeducation.org (It is a website of the Center for Parenting Education Organization. It is a resource to help parents do the best job they can to raise their children.)

**What is Responsibility?**

When asked what traits parents would like their children to have now and as adults, one of the most common responses is “to be responsible.” This is a broad term which means many different things, including:

* Being dependable so people know they can count on you,
* Keeping one’s word and agreements,
* Meeting one’s commitments,
* Doing something to the best of one’s ability,
* Being accountable for one’s behavior,
* Accepting credit when you do things right and acknowledging mistakes,
* Being a contributing member of one’s family, community and society.

Being responsible is a key to children’s success both in school and in the larger world when they grow up.

**Obedience vs. Responsibility:**

Parents often confuse obedience with responsibility.

Most parents would love their children to do what the parent asks, to follow directions and to not question their authority – understandable and important goals when raising children. However, this is not responsibility!! These behaviors would be classified as obedience.

Over time, most parents want children to accept ownership for a task or chore – the children do it because it needs to be done and accept that it is their obligation to do it. Over time, they may even initiate doing a task “because it needs to be done” – not because they are being told to do it. This attitude would be called responsibility.

Parents may have to give up having things done exactly as they would like them to be done and on their exact timetable in order for a child to move from obedience to responsibility. But allowing a child to “do it his way” will encourage a feeling of pride in accomplishment and foster a sense of responsibility.

**How Involved Should You Be?**

Considering the shift from obedience to responsibility raises the issue of how involved you should be in helping your children to meet their commitments and complete tasks.

Not wanting our children to fail can lead parents to do too much for their children; when this happens, the children don’t learn to take on the responsibility themselves.

On the other hand, there are times when children do need guidance, support or information so that they can learn how to be responsible.

**Finding the balance between over-managing and under-parenting is an art:**

Deciding when it is appropriate to step in and when it is more effective to let go and give the child space to do it his way will depend on the child’s maturity, past behavior with responsibility in general and with this task in particular, the developmental task the child is working on, the child’s temperament, and many other considerations.

Instilling the attitudes and traits that make children responsible occurs over years and involves many different pieces that make up the parenting puzzle.

**The Dual Role of Parents:**

If you have ever wondered if you are being either too strict or too lenient, or if you are giving your children enough love, then you have stumbled upon considerations about the two important roles that parents have. Each has a part in helping your children become responsible.

**Nurturing/Caring Role:**

When you are carrying out the Nurturing/Caring Role, you are being kind and loving to your children. It is in this role that you listen to your children, support them, spend time with them, and are affectionate with them.

As the Nurturing Parent, you communicate unconditional love – no matter what happens, you love your children just because they exist and are yours. This allows your children to take risks, to make mistakes, knowing that they have their parents’ unconditional support and love.

**Structure/Executive Role:**

When you are fulfilling the responsibilities of the Structure/Executive Role, you are setting limits and boundaries, imposing discipline, teaching your children how they should behave, passing on your values, and giving guidance.

By not meeting their needs immediately and not giving them everything they want, you provide an opportunity for your children to tolerate some frustration, delay gratification, become less impulsive and less self-centered.

You set standards of behavior that you expect your children to meet. You establish consequences for breaking rules and you follow through on those consequences. You teach your children to be appreciative for what they have.

It is through the Executive Role that you hold your children accountable for their behavior, and that in turn, fosters the development of a sense of responsibility.

**Dual Roles Combined:**

Children need their parents to carry out both roles. Children are more likely to accept the limits you set and are more likely to want to meet your expectations (i.e. be responsible) when you provide a warm, caring and supportive relationship that underlies the discipline you impose.

Healthy parenting occurs when children are raised in a home in which there is unconditional love along with clear boundaries, limits, rules and consequences.

**How High Self-Esteem Leads to Responsibility:**

It has been shown that children with high self-esteem tend to be more responsible. They are better at:

* Waiting for what they want – they believe that with persistence and practice they can reach a goal.
* Acknowledging their mistakes and learning from them.
* Sticking to a task.
* Being willing to ask for help.
* Being clear about their strengths and weaknesses.
* Taking risks and trying new things.
* Believing that they can solve problems they encounter.

How can parents instill a high sense of self-esteem in their children? One way is by providing messages that build each of the two essential components of self-esteem, feeling lovable and feeling capable.

**Feeling Lovable:**

Children feel capable when they have a sense of power, competency and control over their lives, believe that they can handle challenges and that they are able to make a contribution to their environment, and when they feel pride in accomplishment.

It is the capable part of Self-esteem that most ties into the Executive Role of parents and that fosters responsibility.

When children feel capable, they are more likely to meet their obligations, sign on for new tasks, try their hardest and feel good about what they do. All of these things will increase a child’s responsibility.

You can increase your child’s sense of responsibility by helping them to feel that they are capable by sending “Doing” Messages. These messages refer to all the things your children can do, their special areas of talent, and also to their potential and their growth.

**Over-Indulgence and Teaching Responsibility:**

Much has been written these days about the “entitled and over-indulged generation.” The traits that these children exhibit are the antithesis of what it takes to be responsible.

**Over-indulged children:**

* Frequently expect things to be done for them that they could do for themselves.
* Are demanding.
* Do not show gratitude or appreciation.
* Often have an abundance of ‘things’ but never feel like they have enough.
* Do not tolerate frustration well.
* Have a hard time waiting for something that they want.
* Do not admit to mistakes.
* Do not try to do their best.
* Do not think about giving back or being generous, either at home or in the community.

**Three Ways to Over-indulge:**

According to Jean Illsley Clark in her book, **How much is enough?** There are 3 basic ways that parents overindulge their children.

**1. Giving Too Many Things-**

Giving them too many material things or too many activities without the expectation that they will fulfill obligations. This would clearly interfere with a child becoming responsible, either about his commitments or for his things.

**Examples of giving too much would be:**

* A 5-year old boy gets a new video game as it is released even though he does not take care of his things and does not show appreciation for what he has.
* A 13-year old girl takes private music lessons, but often doesn’t practice because she also is on the travel tennis team and is on the student council. Sometimes she misses the tennis practices on Friday nights because she prefers being with her friends.

**2. Doing Too Much-**

Doing things for children that they are able to do for themselves. This results in them not learning skills of everyday living and how to care for themselves.

This also occurs when parents do not require them to be contributing members of the family. The child is not expected to be responsible, is not given the opportunity to do so and does not learn the skills and attitudes that will lead to responsibility.

**Examples of this type of over-indulgence would be:**

* The mother of a 5-year old hangs up his coat for him even though he can reach the hook himself.
* 13-year old Brian never makes his own social arrangements; his mother does that for him.
* The father of a 4-year old still gets him water from the refrigerator even though the child has a very steady hand and is capable of pouring the water himself.

**3. Not Expecting Enough-**

Not expecting enough or demanding enough of children. This has to do with parents not requiring their children to meet their obligations or the parents’ expectations, or to face the consequences of their actions.

These parents do not hold their children accountable for their behavior, they make excuses for them, and ‘bail’ them out when they get in trouble or slack off.

**Examples of this type of over-indulgence would be:**

* 10-year old Billy is supposed to take out the trash, but when it is cold out, his father does it for him.
* 7-year old Alex begs to stay up to watch television until 10:00 pm on a school night even though his usual bedtime is 8:00. His father lets him even though he knows Alex will be too tired the next day.
* 3-year old Sasha’s father cleans up her toys for her after she is finished instead of having her participate in the effort.
* 14-year old Sam makes plans to go out, even though there had been family plans to celebrate Grandma’s birthday that night; the parents change their plans to accommodate Sam.

**How to Avoid Over-Indulgence:**

By carrying out the “Executive” role, parents can avoid the pitfalls of over-indulgence, help their children to feel good about themselves and learn to be responsible.

**They can:-**

* Set limits
* Say no
* Hold children accountable
* Establish and enforce rules
* Set expectations
* Encourage children to give back in some way
* Assign chores and make sure they get done
* Set and follow through with consequences.