

Building Kids' Skills Through Increasing Responsibility

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What new responsibilities are your children ready to handle? It's easy to get into the habit of doing many things for your kids that they really could be doing for themselves. While your kids may be happy to let you do these tasks, they won't learn how to clean their rooms by watching you do it!

One mom told the story of how she had always done her daughter's laundry. When her daughter was preparing to move to a college dorm in the next town, her plan was to come home every couple weeks so her mom could do her wash. She wanted to buy enough underwear to last between trips instead of learning to wash it herself!

Noticing When They Are Ready to Learn

Most of the time your children will not be begging you for more responsibility. So it's up to you to notice when they are to take on something new.

For example, when my son was about 6-years-old I asked him what he wanted for breakfast. He wasn't sure so I gave him some choices. Would you like cereal? No. Yogurt with fruit? No. Toast with jam? No. Oatmeal? No.

As he rejected each suggestion, I felt increasingly frustrated. He also didn't appear overly appreciative of my efforts to help him get breakfast. This was when I realized I could turn this responsibility over to him.



My husband and I explained to my son and his older sister that from now on they would be responsible for getting their own breakfast. We moved the breakfast supplies to a lower shelf so they could easily help themselves. Did they thank us for this new responsibility? No! In fact I remember a lot of whining as they tried to convince us it was really better for us to get them breakfast!

David, father of 4-year-old Ruby, was tired of putting her to bed then have her request a drink of water. He solved the problem by telling Ruby she could get her own drink of water whenever she wanted. The only stipulation was that she needed to do it quietly so that he wasn't disturbed after putting her to bed.

Ruby knew she could ask for his help but then the next night she would have to go to bed 15 minutes earlier. She quickly learned to get her own drink of water without her dad's help!

Providing Guidance While Letting Go

When you give your kids a new responsibility, expect some mistakes. Mistakes are part of learning anything new. While you can provide some guidance, ultimately you have to let them try it on their own.

When do you let your kids make pasta using boiling water? That one scared me especially since my aunt had been severely burned by hot water as a teen.

My kids love pasta and wanted to be able to make their own by around age 10. I made sure my kids were well aware of the dangers of boiling water. I showed them how to safely go between the stove and the sink to dump the water out. Then I needed to step back and let them try. Fortunately they've made lots of pasta and never been burned!

When are your kids ready to clean the bathroom? This "not very fun but necessary" task can be learned in pieces. Perhaps your preschooler is capable of using the toilet brush to scrub the toilet. When your

children are a bit older, you can show them how to wipe off the floors. When they can reach the mirrors, they can clean those. Soon they'll be able to clean the whole bathroom themselves!

Preschoolers are often the most enthusiastic age group for helping out. Take advantage of their eagerness! While they will make mistakes and not perform the task as well as you could, they will be learning that as part of your family they are expected to help out.

Turning Over Responsibility to Your Kids

A mom complained about how exhausted she was when her kids started school again in the fall. Although her girls were in 3rd and 6th grade, she did a lot of extra work for them.

In just one day, she did all these extra tasks:

- Tried to pick daughter up early from school to take her to her piano lesson but daughter forgot and took the bus home. Lectured daughter on the importance of remembering her piano lessons.
- Dumped out kid's backpacks and sorted through school papers.
- Worked on making dinner while be interrupted numerous times to help with homework.
- Reviewed graded schoolwork with children.
- Ran to the store to buy purple shirts after children announced that they need to wear purple tomorrow for Spirit Day.
- Packed forms, supplies and planners into each child's backpack.
- Spent 10 minutes looking for the girls' library books which were due the next day.
- Packed the girls' lunches.
- Did a load of laundry in the late evening after one child reported having no clean socks.
- After putting the kids to bed, got the youngest a drink of water.

Which of these tasks could be turned over to her daughters? The girls are probably old enough to take responsibility for sorting through their school papers, finding their library books, packing their lunches, preparing their backpacks for the next day, doing laundry and getting a drink of water.

Which could be skipped? While the girls will be disappointed if they don't have purple shirts for Spirit Day, they may be inspired to plan better in the future. Although clean socks are nice, wearing a dirty pair of socks one day will not actually kill a child!

Which could be reduced with limits or consequences? Lecturing her daughter about missing her piano lesson does little to help her daughter remember in the future. If her daughter had to pay for the missed lesson or write an apology note to her teacher, she's more likely to remember the lesson in the future.

Dinner preparation could be less stressful by limiting homework help to other times. For example she could establish homework help time between 3:00 – 4:00 and 7:00 – 8:00.

When you take on responsibilities your children really could be handling or fail to set limits, you are likely to feel overwhelmed. What new responsibilities are you going to give your kids?

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