

Teaching Children Self-Control and Self-Responsibility: Parenting 101

It starts before the child is even born, parents-to-be begin to wonder what their child will be like or who they will become as they grow into adulthood. Most parents hope to have a child who behaves in public, at their grandparents' home, or makes wise decisions as a teenager. One thing is certain; children will not achieve this unless they are taught self-control and self-discipline.

Developing these two skills help children grow up to be confident, caring and responsible adults. Parents teach their children self-control and self-discipline by guiding them in ways that support their growth and development. Discipline is ongoing and changes as children grow older. Some of the following discipline techniques can help children develop self-responsibility and control.

Set fair and reasonable limits. Setting reasonable limits based on age offers realistic guidelines for children and helps them feel secure. It also teaches them what acceptable expectations for behavior are. Limits also need to be consistently enforced. Children become confused when limits are not consistent or rules are never stated to begin with. As a result, they may misbehave because they don't know what appropriate expectations are in certain situations.

Give Clear and Positive Instructions. As with adults, children want to feel successful in what they do. How we ask children to do things changes as they grow older but one thing that doesn't change is how we state what we want done. Giving clear instructions and making sure the request is heard is important for children of all ages to be successful.

Another thing to keep in mind is to accept how the job or request is done. For example, many parents have trouble with how their children "make their bed." If parents continuously remake the bed for the child instead of teaching them how to do it, the child may eventually not even try for fear of not meeting parental expectations.

Use consequences. Letting children learn from experiences can be quite effective if done properly. Parents should tell children what the consequences will be for breaking a limit ahead of time. Consequences give children a choice, and parents must be willing to accept the child's decision to experience the consequence. Consequences are used to teach responsibility and decision-making. The situation provides the learning opportunity and helps develop a sense of accountability for one's actions.

Say what you mean and mean what you say. An example of this is when parents ask their children if they are ready for bed instead of telling them bedtime is in 15 minutes and helping them transition to bedtime. Asking a question can and will often lead to an answer of no when

that may not be the desired response. Do not give options if there are none available. Another example of this may be telling a child you will throw their bike into the trash if they don't put it away in the garage or wear a helmet. Saying this is far easier than following through on it. Unless you fully intend to throw the bike, and your money, into the trash do not say it. Perhaps the bike is off limits for a week and is locked in the shed for the time being.

Help Children to Problem-Solve. Children will and do get into disagreements with each other or face situations where they may have to make difficult choices. In the case of disagreements, have each child tell the other his or her side without being interrupted. You may write down information and read it back to your children. Let each child respond by naming the problem. Ask for solutions and write them down without making comments. Discuss all the solutions and decide which one you can all live with. Try out the solution. Ask: Is the solution working?

Don't forget to let children problem solve on their own as they get older. It doesn't help for parents to always come to their child's rescue. You may still need to guide decision-making from time-to-time but children will be more confident in their decision making ability if they are allowed to make, follow and experience the positive or negative consequence of their decisions.

Model Appropriate Behavior. Children are quick to imitate or act like adults. It's important for parents to model actions such as sharing, helping, cooperating, taking care of their belongings, and following through on plans and promises. Children will copy these behaviors and learn what acceptable behavior now and in the future is. Likewise, parents who respond to frustration with aggression and profanity or treat others with disrespect are likely to see these behaviors in their children.

Remember to use effective discipline techniques to help you raise responsible, confident and happy children who become adults who have the same qualities. Giving children opportunities to practice the social skills they need to succeed will guide them in developing self-responsibility and self-control. You'll be glad you took the time to help your children learn these skills and so will your children.

The full length version of this article originally appeared in the March 2006 issue of Parenting NH. Ann Hamilton is an Extension educator in family and consumer resources with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension in Carroll County. She can be reached at ahamilton@ceunh.unh.edu

The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. UNH, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture and New Hampshire counties cooperating. "Helping You Put Knowledge and Research to Work."