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Parenting and responsibility

One of the most frustrating jobs a parent can face is the development of a sense of responsibility in an adolescent whose primary view of the world is as a place that owes him a living.

Too often, the goal of nurturing a small child seems to be carried too far; some parents feel that the best expression of their love is the satisfaction of the child's every need and desire, without any real emphasis on teaching the youngster that she is also expected to assume increasing responsibility for her own welfare, and for making some contribution to the family.

A sense of responsibility, like many other habits — such as healthy eating or courtesy to others — works best if started early.

For example, an infant can be taught that its parents have a need for privacy and rest and that, in normal circumstances, it can't keep making demands for their attention after bedtime. A toddler can learn that he can bring the dishes from the table to the sink, or help her parents pick up scattered toys. A second grader can be responsible for making the bed, putting on sunblock daily and emptying the waste baskets. A teenager can volunteer at a nursing home or earn clothing money with a part-time job.

The complexity of activities for which the child can be responsible should grow with time, so that by the end of high school, the young adult is capable of safely and effectively going out on her own to college or a job.

An essential part of the sense of responsibility should be the idea

that, as a member of family, a school class, a scout troop or as a citizen, he is expected to be a contributor and to be accountable for his actions. This is an integral part of the sense of self-worth that parents and our school system are trying so hard to give to our children. It is difficult to feel worthwhile if a child doesn't sense that she is a necessary part of the world.

Part of the sense of responsibility is the ability to organize time. Many children (and adults) have trouble doing the necessary things in life because they haven't learned to set priorities or to use memory joggers. Parents can be a big help to children by teaching them such basic organizing skills as keeping a running record of school assignments or using a check list for being sure that all homework is turned in daily.

Helping to establish a sense of responsibility is one of the greatest gifts that a parent can give a child — and one of the most essential. It lets a child know that he really matters and that he can make a positive difference to his own life and his family's. If started early, the gradual development of a sense of responsibility avoids the rude jolt that can hit a pampered adolescent who goes out into the real world at the end of high school, and can give him the secure feeling that his parents have developed faith in his integrity and competence.

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