

## **Raising Responsible Kids**

Everywhere you turn lately, people are saying the same thing: "There's too much talk about being a victim, and not enough talk about being responsible for your own actions. At what point do we stop making excuses for people's behavior and start holding them accountable for their actions?"

It's almost stereotypic to expect a small child to avoid taking responsibility for his or her actions. But now we're seeing adults acting in the same way. They spend their energy trying to get out of something, blaming everyone and everything (husband, wife, parents, economics, etc.) but themselves. The best way to stop this trend is to develop responsible children who will develop into responsible adults.

### **Responsible - Able to Handle Consequences**

Responsibility is defined as: "accountable, able to accept consequences for one's behavior." If we're going to raise responsible kids, we have to start with consequences - teaching children the three A's: be aware of consequences, anticipate them and most importantly, accept them. Consequences are the key to understanding behavior. They explain why a behavior happens. Simply stated, if a child experiences a pleasant consequence after doing something, he's more likely to do it again. If he experiences an unpleasant consequence, he's less likely to do it again.

If we want to raise responsible kids, our task as parents is to teach them that there is a connection between behaviors and consequences. We can do this by establishing a household where there are consistent pleasant consequences for positive behaviors and unpleasant consequences for negative behaviors. With this, children learn early on to think ahead before acting. The more a child is prepared for consequences, the better he can handle them.

### **Be Consistent**

To teach kids how to handle the consequences as a result of their actions, parents need to be consistent in how they follow through with promised rewards or negative consequences. For example, if you promise to rent a video game after homework is completed, do it consistently. Likewise, if homework is not completed, no rented game, consistently. This is how kids learn to connect behaviors with consequences. Mom and dad, as a team, should be consistent in presenting and discussing expected behaviors and consequences. Otherwise, kids will play mom against dad, always siding with the lenient parent. Consistency is very important and often very difficult to pull off.

### **Say What You Mean; Mean What You Say**

Parents need to say what they mean by spelling out their expectations ahead of time. This will help when your child not only argues on technicalities but when he tries to wheel and deal to lessen the negative consequence. For example, a little boy was told that if he didn't shower by 7:30 he couldn't watch TV. He did so but didn't use soap so his mom said no TV. The boy replied, "Mom, you just said to take a shower. You didn't say I had to use soap!" This is why it's important for us parents to mean what we say, so that our kids spend less time trying to get us to change our mind, and more time learning to accept the negative consequence for their actions. And to an irresponsible child the word no often means, "let's negotiate." To avoid these scenes, we need to say what we mean, spelling out our expectations ahead of time.

### **Don't Rescue**

As parents, it's natural to want to rescue our kids from danger. We don't want them to suffer any pain, but sometimes pain is inevitable and can often be a valuable teacher. If kids make mistakes, they can learn to see these as stepping-stones for growth and genuine learning experiences. But, if we develop a pattern of rescuing our kids, or becoming blinded to the truth - unwilling to acknowledge that our kids could actually perform negative behaviors, we run the risk that our kids will find it increasingly difficult to face negative consequences, as they become

adults. As an example: Mom catches her toddler scribbling on the living room wall with a crayon. As she is yelling at him grandma comes and picks him up and says it was "just an accident." The toddler, basking in the joy of being let off the hook, says to himself, "With grandmas, you're innocent even when proven guilty!"

### **Don't Give In**

In a cartoon, a psychologist is asking a small child if he goes along with the current thinking that kids can do as they please, regardless of their parents' wishes. The child replies, "No sir. I believe in the good old traditional values: scream your head off until they give in!" If a child learns that a screaming temper tantrum gets him out of having to eat broccoli, pretty soon the temper tantrum is used to get out of other things he doesn't want to do. As parents, once we have spelled out the expected behaviors and consequences for behaviors, and once we have set up the rules of the house, we have to make up our minds not to give in. It's tough, but we have to realize that by giving in, we're perpetuating the behavior. When we give in to a negative consequence for a negative behavior, our child's negative behavior will continue in the hopes that we will give in again.

### **Look for the Positives**

If our goal is to get our kids to connect behaviors with consequences, there's no better way to develop this connection than through positive consequences for positive behaviors. Why? Because the earlier kids get used to receiving and working towards positive consequences, the easier it is for them to handle negative consequences. How, then, do we get them to concentrate on positive attention? This can be done by keeping in mind three simple guidelines about positives:

- 1) Keep a 4 to 1 ratio of positives to negatives.
- 2) Praise with lots of animation.
- 3) Praise specific actions.

The reason for the 4 to 1 ratio is obvious. The more positives a child hears in contrast to the negatives, the more likely the child will remember the positives. The reason for animated praise is simple, kids like action, emotion and commotion. If you want their attention, be animated. If we don't make a big deal out of the positives, kids get bored and look for action through negative behaviors. A good rule of thumb: be excited when you praise, and calm when you correct. The reason our praise needs to be specific is that kids remember and pay attention to specific compliments. We can always find some progress, whether a behavior is happening more often, lasting longer, or is done with more energy. The more we concentrate on positives, the more likely kids will continue the pattern of positive behaviors for positive consequence.