



American Academy of Pediatrics



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Responsibilities and Chores

As children enter and move through their school years, they become increasingly able to manage matters like homework and school projects on their own. Consequently, each year they should take on more responsibilities in the classroom and at home. During the middle years of childhood most youngsters can help clean their rooms, make their beds, pick up their toys, and help out in the kitchen or the yard. Some feed and care for pets. These daily chores and responsibilities are an important part of learning that life requires work, not just play.

Normally, of course, children are still preoccupied with their desire to have fun. While they may pitch in, particularly if helping out gives them time with their parents, children are not likely to ask for household tasks, and parents often need to assign responsibilities as part of belonging to the family. At this age, many children find it difficult to follow through and complete their chores, at least initially. Responsibility and initiative are learned through a gradual process of guidance and reward.

Procrastinating and Dawdling

As your own child takes on more responsibilities, he will probably have periods of acting irresponsibly, procrastinating and dawdling. Most children do. During these times you need to step in and, with encouragement and gentle guidance, point him in the right direction.

Sometimes parents may demand too much of their children, or may see a problem in everything their children do. They may burden them with too many responsibilities - an unfair number of chores, excess hours of taking care of younger siblings or a too rigorous schedule of after-school activities. When that happens, children may feel overwhelmed and resist taking on any responsibilities at all. Parents need to guard against this kind of overloading, while still making sure that their youngsters are assuming an appropriate level of responsibility. Children, of course, differ in the personal traits and temperament they bring to tasks. Some are simply not very persistent and drift away in the middle of chores. Others have difficulty getting organized. Still others have trouble shifting from one activity to another. You should have a good sense of your child's style, and shape your expectations accordingly.

Children need to have some obligations and duties within the family, or they will not learn to accept responsibility. In unstructured home environments, or in families that are very permissive and where little is expected of children, youngsters are losing out on some valuable learning experiences, and their development of a sense of responsibility and initiative may not happen until later in life, if ever. As a result, whenever demands are placed upon these children, they

appear to procrastinate or dawdle, never having learned to get started meeting their responsibilities and completing them.

What Parents Can Do

If your own child procrastinates and dawdles, especially around responsibilities and chores, here are some simple management techniques that are often helpful:

1. Carefully spell out the tasks your child must perform. Make sure she understands what is expected of her on a daily and a weekly basis. Star charts or chore lists posted in your youngster's room or on the refrigerator should clearly show what your expectations are. With a school-age child, particularly one who has not taken on responsibilities before, you should introduce one new task at a time; if you spring a long list on her, she will probably fail and rebel.
2. Honest praise from you can be the most effective way of motivating your child and guaranteeing her success. As your youngster completes a regular task, praise her and the job she did. Initiating tasks on her own without a reminder, completing a special task or doing an unusually good job with a regular one might merit a reward of some sort. You may also want to consider tangible rewards like allowances and stickers tied to completed chores.
3. Your child may be greatly helped in remembering to do chores if your family life has a structure and routines. Encourage her to do her chores at the same time each day. Routines of other activities - including meals, homework, play and bedtime - also can teach organization and help her develop responsibility.
4. Schedule weekly family meetings to review your child's progress. Ask her to discuss her ideas about chores and other responsibilities. Create new or modified "contracts" of the chores that are expected of her. Most important, supervise and support your child, which is the best way to ensure that she is being responsible.
5. When your youngster does not complete her chores and other responsibilities, it may be necessary to discipline her. For example, you might decide to revoke certain privileges or special activities that mean a lot to her. Although some parents may feel that badgering or scolding a child to the point of starting an argument will get her to accept more responsibility, this approach is rarely effective. Rewarding successes and providing encouragement is always much more effective.

Seeking Outside Help

In some cases a procrastinating youngster may be helped by professional intervention. Review your concerns with your own pediatrician, who may be able to reassure you that your child is behaving normally. On the other hand, the pediatrician may consider a referral to a child psychiatrist or psychologist for an evaluation, not only if your child consistently fails to complete everyday home responsibilities but also if irresponsibility is evident at school.

This evaluation might also help determine if other problems are present that may only appear to be procrastination. For example, a youngster with an attention difficulty may have trouble concentrating on her homework; for this child, procrastination is not the problem. Treatment in this situation should be aimed at managing the attention deficit itself.

Early efforts to help children who consistently avoid responsibility are important for their future success.

Allowances for the Middle-Years Child

For children in this age group, an allowance serves two purposes:

- An allowance motivates children to assume responsibilities around the home. These tasks should contribute to the family's (and not just the child's) well-being. Yes, children need to learn to care for themselves (clean up their room), but they also need to contribute to the family.
- An allowance introduces children to the value of money - to saving, budgeting and planning. These are life skills that are important to acquire. School-age children are not ready to assume the responsibility for purchasing necessary items, from clothing to school supplies, but their allowance can be used for discretionary purchases. For that reason, it should be only a modest amount. However, since discretionary purchases tend to increase with age, so should a child's allowance.

Make sure your child clearly understands the purpose of an allowance. If you use it as a reward or payment for chores, then the rules should be clear about what your youngster needs to do to earn that money, and you need to abide by the agreement that you make. If the allowance is provided for discretionary spending and to teach money management, then a different set of rules apply. Spell out the amount, purpose and expectations for the money in advance, and monitor the spending to teach important decision-making lessons.

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