

# How to teach your child to be responsible



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## When will my child be ready to take on responsibility?

At this stage, it's about starting your child on grasping the basics of responsibility. He's too young to take on complicated chores by himself, although he may love to help you around the home or on shopping trips.

At the same time, your child is starting to be more independent and probably loves to make decisions for himself. You can encourage this by setting him tasks you know he's capable of completing. This will let him know that he can help to look after himself, and the world around him, and will prepare him for bigger responsibilities later in childhood.

## How can I teach my child to be responsible?

### Set age-appropriate tasks

Think of something you know your child can do without too much difficulty, so that

he's likely to succeed at it. Give him clear instructions about what you want him to do, so he knows exactly what's expected of him.

Your child may be daunted by a request to "tidy your room". It's not specific, and may involve several steps, such as putting away clothes, making the bed and straightening the rug. But, "Please put your puzzle back into its box," is manageable.

Giving your child chores that require some effort, but are achievable for his age, will increase his sense of independence.

### **Show and tell**

When you give your child a job to do, explain it in simple terms. For example, if you're asking him to set the table, start him off by setting one place yourself: "Look how I'm putting one plate on the table, in front of the chair."

If you find yourself spending more than a few minutes showing your child how to do something, it may be too complicated for him at this age. Instead, you could make him responsible for a small part of the task, such as putting out the spoons.

### **Work, then play**

Although your child still has a short attention span, you can start to teach him to get chores out of the way before relaxing or having fun. He'll get the message when you say, "Yes, I want to take you to the park! But first we need to clear up after lunch."

Be friendly and matter-of-fact about it, and admit that you prefer the fun, too. Show him that you're not being bossy, just expecting him to behave responsibly, in the same way you do yourself.

A good way to explain this to your child is to use the "when-then" rule. For example, you could say, "When we've cleared the table, then we can play with the bricks".

It's important to use the word "when", rather than "if". That's because "if" suggests that you only have to clean the table "if" you want to play with the bricks. But

"when" establishes that the table has to be cleared at some point no matter what, and the bricks are just an added bonus.

### **Make chores fun**

We all enjoy tasks more when they're fun and social. Your child loves spending time with you, and may not see emptying the tumble dryer as a chore. It's fun to pull out warm, fluffy clothes and pile them in a basket! If you're tidying up toys, have a race to see who can put away the most blocks.

### **Avoid threats**

Make it clear to your child that he has to follow certain rules, but explain them in a positive way, without [threats](#) or ultimatums. If your child says, "I want a biscuit," respond with, "When you sit at the table, you can have a biscuit."

### **Set a good example**

Show your child what responsibility is by taking good care of your own things and your own space. Put your car keys on the hook where they belong instead of on the table, and pick up clothes off your bedroom floor. Explain why you're doing it too, so your child learns why it's important to be responsible. For example, "I'm going to put my car keys in the proper place, so I can find them again easily next time we go out."

### **Focus on effort, not results**

When your child's trying to stick his head through the arm of his jumper, it can be tempting to just sigh and take over yourself. But practice makes perfect, so focus on the effort he's making, even if he doesn't get it quite right. Don't criticise him or take over. It may decrease his confidence and reduce his desire to help.

Instead, try breaking the task into manageable chunks. You can help him with any difficult bits, like getting his arms in the right holes, then let him pull on the jumper by himself. This will give him a great feeling of achievement, and he'll be happy to try again next time.

Phrase your suggestions in a gentle, encouraging way: "Well done for working so hard on getting dressed all by yourself. You're doing great. Why don't you try putting your arm in that hole instead?"

### **Be realistic**

Your child won't always put his shoes by the front door, or put his toys back in his box. If he's out of sorts, try not to get impatient. Just remind him calmly, "Remember, put your trucks away when you've finished playing with them."

If he's tired, say, after a day at nursery, give him a bit of extra help. He's probably spent all day following rules and wants to have a bit of a break now he's home.

### **Pour on the praise**

Whenever your child tries to act responsibly, even if he doesn't succeed, give him plenty of praise and attention. This shows your child that his efforts are important and appreciated.

Be as specific as possible: "You did so well putting Fluffy's food neatly in his bowl!", or "Well done for trying so hard to get dressed by yourself". Point out exactly how his efforts have helped everyone else: "Now that you've put the spoons on the table, we can all have tea!"

Get tips on teaching your child to be [respectful](#), and find out when you can expect your preschooler to show [empathy](#).



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Polly Logan-Banks is an experienced editor with a keen interest in producing evidence-based content. Polly is passionate about ensuring that every child gets the best start in life.