

How responsible should your child be?

Weekends are a great opportunity to try out some new ideas which might make your life a little easier and help your child become responsible, says Shelia O'Malley

How do you parent? Are you someone who does everything for your child - picks up their clothes, prepares their lunches, reminds them of what they have to do, drops forgotten items into the school? What about help with dressing, supervising eating, settling fights, making all the decisions? What you might actually be doing is denying the child the opportunity to learn from experience - or learn from the consequences of their actions, for example, a forgotten lunch.

An enabling parent, however, treats their child with respect and equality and encourages independence. This parent also allows the child to experience consequences, because a child can become remarkably responsible when they are given responsibility. Seven-year-olds can make their own school lunches, and settle their own fights, and a 10-year-old can use an alarm clock and be responsible for getting up. It all makes life a bit easier for you, and it's a more responsible approach.

It's essential for you to take time to teach your child a new task, but it'll be worth it! Make the time to show your child how to make their own lunch and you'll be surprised how interested they are, especially if they're involved in menu planning or shopping - 'as long as it's healthy' is my mantra! They love to learn, and you need to capitalise on that. Lots of encouragement enables children to learn, while criticism or 'put downs' make learning threatening and reduce the child's enthusiasm. Remember, they are children, and ask yourself, "Are my standards too high?" As long as you focus on effort, learning will continue.

As children take on new tasks (always better if they choose), a parent needs to be in the background, like a friend, encouraging them, showing and assisting when necessary, letting them try for themselves and gradually withdrawing into the background, happy to see them growing in independence. Let children do it themselves as much as possible with your help and



encouragement.

Identify some new task that you could help your child achieve in order to encourage competence. Examples could be, children dressing themselves, brushing their teeth, tying their shoes, riding a bike, washing their hair, cooking and baking. Young children can get their own breakfast if you set it up with a low cupboard for ease of access, with plastic bowls, cereal in an 'easy pourer' and a small plastic jug of milk in the fridge. The secret with any new challenge is to 'size it down' and set age appropriate challenges your child can achieve. The result will be that they feel good about themselves with increased competence and confidence and higher self esteem.

What are you doing for your children that they could do for themselves? What new responsibility could you begin to introduce

this week, maybe with a star chart to encourage them.

If you want this to work, there's only one rule: An absence of any criticism of your child's efforts while they are learning, then just provide the opportunity, give lots of encouragement, see their effort, notice the improvement and learning will continue!

Sheila O'Malley trained with clinical psychologist, author and speaker Dr Tony Humphreys and now delivers talks, workshops and courses in Ireland in addition to offering one-to-one mentoring for parents.



Her one-day Saturday parenting course is held monthly in Bewleys Hotel, Leopardstown on 'Self Esteem- the key to your child's future'. You'll find more details at www.practicalparenting.ie. Booking is open now for the next course. Email info@practicalparenting.ie to book.

The enabling parent checklist

Enabling children comes second to nurturing, but it's vital for children's survival:

- Give your child lots of opportunities to learn new things
- Children have a natural drive to learn and parents need to capitalise on it.
- Children love to learn as long as there's an absence of criticism.

• Time for training and guidance is essential for a child to learn something new.

• Children become responsible when they are given responsibility.

• Parents need to challenge children

• Encouragement of children is essential when they are learning.

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