

Charlotte's New Year resolution was to develop her four children's sense of responsibility. They would all benefit, she reckoned. The children each had weak points and strong points when it came to different areas of responsibility. Sue was good at taking care of her siblings, but reluctant to tidy up after herself. Matt was very reliable about his homework, but tended not to take responsibility for decision-making. Paul guarded his money carefully, but hated doing his chores. Mark was still little. He was clever and cheerful, but showed signs of being careless about his belongings. Some had weaknesses where the others had strengths – seven areas of responsibility, she sighed. How could she possibly tackle it all effectively?

She pictured a SmartNanny from a TV reality show. The no-nonsense nanny would set ten minutes aside after Sue's homework but before her TV time, insisting that she whip around and put things in their place. She would materialise as Sue finished a project or came out of the shower, and remind her to put away scissors and towels as she went along. Every single time that Matt said, 'Where shall I put my book?' or 'Which homework shall I do first?' SmartNanny would not yell the answer from the kitchen, she would sit beside him and remember to pass the ball back into his court and teach him to develop his own judgement. When Paul pulled a long face for the tenth time each day when she reminded him to pack his lunch-box or lay the table, she would not scream; she would encourage him to play his part in the family by helping... and she would say it for the eleventh time a few minutes later. And SmartNanny would never ever turn her face aside indulgently and cover a smile when Mark shrugged his shoulders and raised his tiny hands and lisped 'I dinno' when asked where his shoes were. She would not ruffle his hair and forget all her tasks as she watched him bounce off again, hop-hop-free-as-a-bird-just-as-a-child-ought-to-be. She would put down the mending she was busy with, kneel down and hold his hands in hers, and look him in the eyes and retrace his activities until they could both work out where he had taken off his shoes and then she would send him to retrieve them while she picked up her mending again.

Charlotte knew that was how it should be done, but ...



1. How much responsibility should a child be expected to take on?
2. How can I help my child to develop a sense of responsibility?
3. What about the argument that 'children should be allowed to be children and not forced to grow up too quickly'?
4. How do I find the time and energy to be consistent and wise all the time?

## Discussion



1. The answers will differ from family to family, depending on culture, parents' upbringing and philosophical approach, time and money constraints, etc. And within each family the answer will change, too, according to the age of the child and the personalities of the different children.

Whatever you decide, remember that it is vital to the child's self esteem that s/he develop a sense of responsibility in the seven areas mentioned above: decision-making, belongings, home work/studies, siblings, chores, money and tidying up. There might be other areas, such as responsibility for his/her health or appearance, for pets or other people's belongings. Also, remember that rights and responsibility are linked. The right to be a child and engage in play goes with the responsibility to tidy up.

2. The SmartNanny had it all right! Her ideas were great, and we need to try them all out. They stem from sensible principles:
  - be consistent
  - be firm
  - explain the value of the act
  - discuss the consequences of different behaviours
  - be present: be THERE with your child
  - act out of love
  - lead by example
  - keep tabs of everything
  - remember that you are always on duty!

*The Five Marist Tenets are:*

- Presence
- Simplicity
- In the Way of Mary
- Family Spirit
- Love of Work

The problems come from the pressures of real life, from our own imperfections and from the exhaustion of realising that it is not enough to do the right thing ten times – ideally we should be the model parent every single time!

It is helpful to talk about consequences when teaching responsibility. When a child like Mark forgets to take his book to school, we parents are torn. Part of us wants to race home and fetch his book so as to protect him from embar-

arrassment and possible damage to his self esteem. Part of us says that we should leave him to suffer the consequences so that he learns the lesson. The latter argument is almost certainly better in the long term. One needs to consider the former, however. The child will not improve if he is made to feel useless in his forgetfulness. Even if it seems to be a strong part of his character, he needs to know that he himself is still a valuable person. A parent can point out that the child will need constantly to struggle against forgetfulness but that he is a whole and worthy person whose forgetfulness is only part of him. He can be given tips to help him: write lists, structure time to plan the day, etc.

Children feel more responsible the more they are involved with processes. A child who has done something to earn his money will tend to be more responsible, as Paul was. Labelling their own clothes, choosing their own chores or helping to pay for some belongings might make children more responsible.

It helps if you and your child remember that you are in this together. Firstly, you need to model the correct behaviour. Secondly, talk to your child. Explain to your child that you are making her take the consequences because you love her and want her to grow and to develop her own personality. Your child needs to know that you support her. In each situation of irresponsibility, look for strategies to help her do better next time. Be clear that this is a learning experience – do not protect your child from learning the lesson, but do not make the homework too hard, either!

3. We might feel torn between wanting to develop a sense of responsibility in our child and wanting to allow them to be children, unburdened by the cares of life. Both approaches have their value, and different parents might take different positions between these two points. It is useful for both adults to develop a shared approach in a household, so that children don't receive mixed messages. However, as with many other areas of discipline, it is not always a problem for one parent to be strict and the other to be more indulgent – as long as there is no conflict and no playing-off of one against the other.

continued

Sometimes a child spontaneously takes on too much responsibility. This is also not desirable. It causes stress for that child which can spiral and grow. If he becomes bossy, he can become unpopular. Or others can lose out on a chance to develop their own responsibilities.

Sometimes one hears a parent say, 'I feel embarrassed that my child looks so dirty! Does she not feel any responsibility about her appearance?' Sometimes this is a case of projecting our own insecurity onto our children, which we need to guard against. On the other hand, one feels that some parents need to worry more about their child's appearance. How do we decide which route to take? Perhaps the soundest advice is to acknowledge one's position honestly ('Am I generally stricter or more lenient?') and then to challenge oneself a little the other way and decide on a position that is best for the child.

4. It is humanly impossible to be consistent and wise 24-7! Life happens and reality takes its toll! However, there are ways to improve one's patience, insight and approach:

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- become self-aware, and make notes of one's behaviour, with brief comments
- set aside time to reflect on one's parenting and behaviour
- develop a time for personal growth and/or spiritual development
- read books about parenting
- seek out discussion groups or support groups within your school or broader community

Taking small steps is often a sure way to make progress. Do something small every week or month until it becomes a habit: the first month you can remember to count to three before you react; the second month you can remember to look your child in the eyes as you listen and as you speak, etc. It is also a great help to remind yourself of the value of your parenting. The efforts you make will reap untold benefits for your child, for society and for other generations.

*Through determined and disciplined efforts we develop a strong character and a resilient will – from Love of Work by Marcellin Champagnat, founder of Marist schools*

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## Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Childline	08 000 55555
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554
Lifeline	011 728 1347

## Further reading

*Life Talk for a Daughter and Life Talk for a Son*, Izabella Little, Oshun Books (Struik), 2006

## Other titles

*in this series include:*

Moodiness  
Drugs  
Fear  
Pressure and suicide  
Peer pressure  
Balancing one's time  
Bullying  
Self-esteem  
Sleepovers  
Death  
Parental presence  
Siblings  
Discipline  
Parties and dates  
Money & possessions  
Academic performance