

TEACHING RESPECT AND RESPONSIBILITY

Dennis L. Peterson

Respect is a rare trait today. Another rarity is responsibility. The shortage of these qualities is now the societal norm. When present, especially in a young person, they stand out in vivid relief.

Why are these traits so rare? One reason is the negative influence of modern media, which glorify and encourage *disrespect* and *irresponsibility*. Failure of parents and schools to teach these qualities exacerbates the problem.

Neither trait is innate; both must be taught, reinforced, and modeled. Only then will children demonstrate those qualities.

RESPECT

Respect is not the same as obedience. A child can obey his or her parents or teachers and yet not exemplify respect. In fact, quite the opposite often is evident. Rather, respect is an *attitude* of heart and mind.

Teaching respect begins in the home. It may involve teaching a child from the time he or she utters the first words to say “please,” “thank you,” “excuse me,” and “yes, sir” or “no, ma’am” and insisting upon the use of those words and phrases as appropriate. It involves instilling the “Golden Rule” principle. Such teaching is reinforced when the child sees the parents practice it.

Teaching respect involves instruction about authority in one’s life and society generally. It involves teaching self-respect, that the child was created in the image of God and is, therefore, *worthy* of respect. It involves teaching respect for one’s parents as the God-ordained caregivers and guardians of the child. Ultimately, it involves—in fact, begins with—teaching a respect for God Himself. One who does not respect God will respect *no* authority, whether police officer, teacher, or parent. Without that foundational respect, the child will have respect for neither others nor himself.

RESPONSIBILITY

When one learns respect, he or she will also acknowledge one’s responsibility to God, parents, and others, not only authority figures but also peers

and strangers. The two qualities are inseparable and therefore must be taught in tandem.

So how can one teach a child these qualities?

1. **Establish clear limits and expectations.** Limit what the child may and may not do. Set up routines: a regular rising time, regular bedtime, toothbrushing time, daily routines, restrictions on media usage, etc. Enforce those limits and routines consistently. You can always relax them as the child matures and demonstrates responsibility to handle more, but you cannot tighten them if you begin too leniently. To do so will lead to rebellion.
2. **Assign chores and duties for the child** rather than doing everything for him. These chores should be age and size appropriate and might include such responsibilities as making his bed, cleaning her room, emptying the trash can, caring for pets, or mowing the lawn. As the child matures and can handle greater responsibilities, more important duties can be added and more privileges granted.
3. **Offer limited choices.** Children cannot make decisions before they are ready, so do not overload your child with options. Imagine taking a child into a large candy store and asking, “Which kind do you want?” Rather, present the child with two or three options and ask, “Which one *of these* do you want?” Rather than opening the closet door and presenting a young girl with myriad dresses from which she must choose one, lay out two outfits and let her choose between only those. As the child gets older, you can increase the number of options.
4. **Allow consequences for choices and actions.** You are not protecting your child by preventing or softening the consequences of choices or actions. You only harm them. If we expect children to learn accountability and responsibility, they must learn that their words, attitudes, choices, and actions have consequences, sometimes painful ones. Enforce discipline and do so consistently. The Bible unequivocally shows that where there is sin, there is judgment. Without instruction in accountability, the child grows up blaming everything that goes wrong or is hurtful to him on everyone except himself. If your child chooses to play video games and not to study for a test, he must learn to accept the low grade he receives as a consequence rather than depend on your running to the teacher to demand that she raise his score or give him another chance.

5. **Accept no excuses.** Excuse-making tends to snowball and fosters irresponsibility. Do not threaten or offer multiple chances. The real world operates on consequences, so let the child learn from consequences.
6. **Nip problems in the bud.** One avoids trouble by having trouble. Teaching respect and responsibility is hard work, and that is why few parents do it. Although they think at the time an opportunity for teaching them arises it is too hard on their child, the real pain and trouble comes as a result of *not* teaching them early, when the child is more pliable. Cline and Fay declare, “We must steel ourselves for resistance and opposition.”¹ Practicing “tough love” early avoids the necessity of even tougher measures down the road.
7. **Model respect.** Set the right example in words and deeds.

BENEFITS

Children who learn respect and responsibility early in life experience greater self-control, which reveals itself in fewer social problems. They are more self-motivated, needing less outside force and extrinsic reward to do right. They demonstrate greater positive independence. They exhibit more self-respect; consequently, they tend to achieve better academically.

Parents also benefit when their child learns these character qualities. The child exhibits fewer behavioral problems; therefore, the parents are less stressed and can be proud that they have reared responsible and respectful children.

As Solomon said, “A wise son maketh a glad father,” and “Thy father and thy mother shall be glad, and she that bore thee shall rejoice” (Pro. 10:1; 23:25).

¹Foster Cline and Jim Fay, *Parenting with Love and Logic* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006).