
Handbook for Families

Delegating Work and Responsibility to Children

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It's Saturday morning at the Bradshaw home. Dad went early to a civic committee meeting and won't be returning for another hour, Tom is on a Scout paper drive till noon, Sara is playing a basketball game at the stake center, and Mother is left with more than a handful. The baby is fussy, two-year-old Megan and four-year-old Zach want breakfast, and Mom promised a casserole for a funeral by noon. The dishes are piling up in the sink, the trash needs to be taken out, and the week's clothes need to be washed. Does this kind of pace sound all too familiar? If it does, you may not be delegating responsibility to your children very effectively.

One of the supreme challenges we face as parents is training children to become responsible and able to take care of themselves and their environment. In order to do this, we need to know:

- What we can and ought to expect of our children.
- The importance of our attitude and method when assigning responsibility to our children.
- What might be done when our children don't respond according to our expectations.

What We Expect of Children

"A lazy mother picks up after her children," says the old adage. Young mothers often believe that picking up after their children and doing the housework themselves is the only way to establish an orderly house. "I want my children to learn how nice it is to have a well-kept home, even if I have to do the work. The problem is that I don't seem to have time for all there is to do." Ultimately, both the mother and the child suffer. The mother is overworked; the child is indulged. It is far better for all members of the family if each child is made responsible for doing certain tasks around the house. These, of course, need to be geared to each child's capacity. Failure at the task will bring discouragement and resentment. To assure that no one resents his assignment, parents should see that the work is shared as equally as possible. Assignments should be challenging, but should not be beyond the capacity of the child, both in the time it takes and the degree of difficulty.

Keep in mind that two children in the same family may develop at such different rates that chores barely within the ability of one child at eight years of age may be accomplished by another as young as four. Parents must here, as in most things, be aware of each child's strengths and limits and make assignments accordingly.

If a child knows that what is being asked is meaningful, that it *will* make a difference, he is much more likely to accept the assignment and complete it. And when all members have specific tasks and all work together to accomplish a job, each feels more a part of and more pride in the family.

Remember, too, that teaching children to love work involves balance. Ask any elementary school teacher how much more work she is able to obtain from children when they receive a recreation or relaxation break. Children will learn to love work as we balance it with relaxation and play.

Our Attitudes and Methods

Early in their development, children have an almost irrepressible urge to care for themselves and take part in the workings of the home. Long before they ever think of work as dull, when in fact it is still an adventure and part of life's discoveries, children love to help. They innately desire to be a part of the workings of the home. They love to feel needed, and with enthusiasm will run to "bring Mother a diaper" or reach high on the wall to "turn off the light."

But somewhere between the toddler's fascination with work as play and the sophisticated junior high schooler's disdain for work of any kind, something is lost.

Why do children exhibit early in childhood a willingness, even a need to take part in the work of the home and then when they are older and their efforts can be even more helpful, they seem less willing? The answer lies, in part, with our own attitude toward work as well as our response to our children's earliest efforts.

One of the most serious handicaps we can impose upon our children may be the handicap of not knowing the satisfaction of a job well done. Some people regard work as drudgery, as punishment, something dull that must be done before the fun of living can begin. To others, work is rewarding, challenging, even exciting. The only difference is the attitude with which we view our labors.

President David O. McKay said, "The privilege to work is a gift, the power to work is a blessing, the love of work is success." (David O. McKay as quoted by F. D. Richards, "The Gospel of Work," *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1969, p. 101.)

Thinking of work in negative terms makes it almost impossible for us to assign tasks to our children without projecting our negative attitude, even if we don't express it openly.

One creative mother turned what could have been a negative experience into a positive one. Her children would frequently walk into the kitchen and cry out, "Mom, I'm starved! What's for dinner?" She wisely taught them that they would get her attention better and the food sooner by saying something like, "Hi, mom, I'm hungry for dinner. What can I do to help?"

Of course, what works in one family may not in another. Learning to manage children is as much trial and error as anything. But some helpful ideas for delegating responsibility were outlined in an article in the August 1979 *Ensign*. (William G. Dyer, “Why, How, and How Not to Delegate,” pp. 12–15.) Some of those ideas follow below:

Determine the assignment. The assignment may be a specific, single task, such as mailing a letter. Or it may be a project—a set of related tasks requiring several skills, like planning a family home evening or doing the grocery shopping. An older son or daughter might be assigned the responsibility for keeping the family car in good repair, while a younger one might be in charge of keeping the car cleaned out.

Explain clearly what is expected. One mother chastised her son for “a lumpy bed-making job” only to hear his reply, “But you never showed me how.” When we ask our children to do a job, they need a clear understanding of our expectations. They need to know how we want the job done, and what the end result should be. We can do this best by working with the child and carefully teaching him the routine.

When we make vague assignments such as “Help me” or “Someone sweep the porch,” we will rarely be pleased with the results. Not only must we explain exactly *what* is to be done, but *who* is to do it, and *when* it is to be done. We must be clear about deadlines: “John, please sweep the porch now; the guests will be here soon.”

This is true for ongoing job assignments as well. Help children determine how often the job must be done, whether daily, weekly, or monthly. And give a deadline, a time to have it completed. Should the task be completed before school, before breakfast, or right after school before playing? Success depends on clear understanding of and agreement on such details. This, too, is when we determine what the consequences are for failure to accomplish the task satisfactorily, if this is applicable. Parents need to make sure they are establishing an approach in which children are held accountable for assignments. If a reward is part of the arrangement, if that is applicable, specify that now.

Get a commitment. After we have given an assignment and explained what is expected, we can give our children a chance to respond—to accept the assignment and commit themselves to it.

By inviting their response, we can also discover and resolve any misunderstandings about the assignment. Furthermore, we are showing that their response matters to us and are giving them a chance to deal with any feelings of inadequacy they may have about the assignment.

Give training with love and encouragement. Loving encouragement and patient repetition are necessary to develop responsibility in young children. Learning will not always occur the first time, perhaps not even the first dozen times. Since children generally have little patience, care should be taken to give short, simple directions and simple tasks to young children and then increase the challenge as the child gains more patience and confidence.

Reporting and follow through. Temple worship teaches a divine management principle which involves reporting on an assigned task once we have accomplished or attempted to accomplish it.

An essential part of delegating responsibility is arranging a regular time for reporting progress or completion. At such a time, we review the child's work, assess his progress, encourage him, and, if appropriate, give additional training or a new assignment. Follow through does not mean that we must continually check up on the child to see that he is doing his job. This could only be interpreted as a lack of trust.

If a child does not complete a task, the wise parent will not take over the responsibility, but will insist in a calm, firm, and supportive manner that the child complete, what he has started. When a child knows that unless he does his job, it won't get done, he will generally assume responsibility for it.

Let go. Once we have trained a child to do a job and then delegated to him the authority to do it, the child must be free to carry out the assignment.

It is here that we as parents are given the opportunity to grow too. For many of us, letting go is the most difficult part of delegating a job. But allowing the child to learn and grow may be more important than having the lawn immaculate or the dishes spotless or the food cooked just so.

When They Don't Respond

As children grow older, they sometimes become less willing to contribute to the family work effort. What do you do when a teenager declines to help with household chores? Consider the experience of one mother who was faced with the problem:

"I had about given up in despair, thinking that I had blown it as a mother. My sons were so tall and strong-willed that my requests of them had become ineffective. The son I was especially having trouble with just seemed to ignore me completely. If I asked him to be home by a certain time, he was invariably late. If I assigned him to do a simple chore that would take only minutes before he went out with friends, he would avoid doing it. Whenever I would ask him why, he just became defensive.

"One morning I looked at him as he ate his breakfast and my heart was full of love for him. He used to let me hug him and give him a kiss on the cheek, but he had made it clear that he had grown out of that. So that morning I simply stood in front of him and poured out my heart to him telling him how much he meant to me. I expressed that I was so glad that he didn't use drugs or get in trouble and that he still attended church with us, everything positive that was true about his life. And when I was through, he looked at me and in a voice that contained more than the usual tenderness, he said, 'Mom, you're okay.'

“Subtle as it may seem, that little expression stirred a hope inside me that I had lost or at least forgotten in my concern that he wasn’t living up to all my expectations. And another thing happened. As he left that morning, I saw him take the garbage cans out to the street, something he hadn’t done in a long time.”

Our expectations often seem of paramount importance to us as we struggle for control in our families. But the scriptures are transparently clear that control is to be obtained *only* “by gentleness, and meekness, and by love unfeigned.” (D&C 121:41.)

“Thank you, I appreciated your doing that. It helped so much” is simple language, but if sincerely expressed can be more effective than any number of sophisticated management techniques.

Forming the helping habit is an effort that requires coordination and unity of purpose between father and mother. This is well illustrated by another account:

Greg’s mother had repeatedly asked him to complete his job assignments, but at fifteen he was demonstrating his independence. Greg’s father confronted him firmly but affectionately about his Sunday pants lying in a heap on the floor of his room, since picking up his clothes was one of his chores. To this Greg’s reasoned response was, “Why should anybody care about where I keep my pants but me? It’s my own business.”

His father agreed that it was Greg’s business and added, “If you are insisting on the right to keep those pants in a heap, you must also take the responsibility for seeing that they are kept clean and ready for church and special occasions.” The next time his mother passed the room the pants were hanging in the closet.

Teaching children to accept responsibilities in the family and enjoy work takes days, weeks, months, and years of vigilance and affection. But our children need to be held accountable in an atmosphere of love and trust. They need to *see us* work, work *beside us*, and learn to *work alone*. Preparing children for responsible adulthood is an important parental responsibility.

Gospel topics: children, family, responsibility, work

[illustrations] Illustrated by Richard Brown