

# The responsible child: How to teach responsibility (ages 3 to 4)



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## What to expect at this age

A preschooler isn't developmentally ready to focus on the greater good or to understand his role in the family, let alone his role in society (he does know, however, that he's the center of the universe!). He's also not ready for complex chores or for maintaining his own schedule. But he does want to be as busy and important as you appear to be. So take a positive view of it if your little one's always underfoot while you're trying to get things done. His desire lays the groundwork for the behaviors that will make him a responsible teen and adult.

## What you can do

**Choose age-appropriate tasks.** Tasks that are too difficult will only overwhelm your preschooler. He'll be daunted by the request to "clean your room" – after all, it's probably even daunting for you. "Put your shoes in the closet," on the other hand, is manageable. You'll be amazed by how much pride and self-reliance he gains from undertaking such simple chores.

**Show and tell.** The best (and perhaps hardest) way to instill a sense of responsibility is to be a good role model with your own possessions – put your car keys where they belong instead of on the dining room table, and tidy up your stack of magazines instead of leaving them all over the couch. Then, when you give your child his own small tasks, show him exactly how to do them (day after day, at least for awhile). Saying, "Time to set the table," makes less sense to him than a demonstration accompanied by, "Look how I'm putting one plate on the table in front of each chair, and the napkins go just like this. Want to help me do that?" If you find yourself spending too much time demonstrating to your preschooler how to perform a task, chances are it's too complicated for him.

**Teach first things first.** Your preschooler isn't too young to learn that work comes before play. He'll get the message when you say, "Sure I want to take you to the park! But first we need to clean up after lunch." Be friendly and matter-of-fact about it, and admit that you prefer the fun, too – then he'll understand that you're not just being bossy, but are simply expecting him to behave responsibly.

**Make the job a game.** Remember learning about barn-raising parties, where the whole village would help a family build a barn, and then everyone would share a feast? We all enjoy tasks more when they're fun, social occasions. Your preschooler is happy to be spending time with you, and he doesn't view emptying the dryer as a chore – it's fun to pull out warm, fluffy clothes and pile them in a basket. Follow his lead and dance to music while you dust together, or have a race to see who can put away the most blocks.

**Establish a routine.** Your preschooler will learn responsible habits more easily if you set a routine early on. Teach him to put his dirty clothes in the hamper and help put his tub toys away after every bath. He'll see that chores are a part of everyday life, not something grownups hand out on a whim.

**Phrase things in a positive way.** Jerry Wyckoff, a family psychologist and the coauthor of *Twenty Teachable Virtues*, suggests using what he calls

"Grandma's rule" to engender responsibility in preschoolers. "Grandma's rule makes it clear that your household has rules that everyone follows," says Wyckoff. So instead of issuing an ultimatum ("If you don't, then you won't"), Grandma's rule says, "*When* you've done what you have to do, *then* you get to do what you want to do." If your child says, "I want to play in the backyard," respond with, "*When* you put your puzzles away, *then* you can go outside to play." Saying, "*If* you clean up your toys, I'll give you a treat," on the other hand, really just bribes your preschooler for what should be normal behavior – and it raises the possibility that he'll decide he can live without the treat and thus pass on cleaning up his toys.

**Give your preschooler space.** For the sake of expediency, you may be tempted to grab his plate and put it in the dishwasher yourself. Try to resist this urge. Instead, concentrate more on your preschooler's efforts than his actual accomplishments. He may not be doing a perfect job, but criticizing him or co-opting his chores will only squelch his desire to help. (And remind yourself that practice *does* make perfect.) Try phrasing your suggestions in an encouraging way: "You've done a really good job clearing your plate. I like to put my dirty dishes in the dishwasher, though, not back on the shelf."

**Expect ups and downs.** "Kids are going to mess up. That's part of being a kid," says Paul Coleman, a father, psychologist, and the author of *How to Say It to Your Kids*. "But you can usually get more compliance when they realize there's a pattern." So try not to express anger or disappointment if your child is having an off day. Just say to him calmly, "Remember, you always put your trucks away when you're done playing with them."

**Pour on the praise.** Positive reinforcement will teach your preschooler that his efforts are important and appreciated. Be specific with your praise: "You did so well putting Fluffy's food right in his bowl," as opposed to "Good job!" When appropriate, point out exactly how his efforts have helped everyone else: "Now that you've put the spoons on the table, we can all eat right away. Let's sit down!"