

## Practical Life at Home: Realistic Responsibilities

Children in Primary (and Toddler) are gaining independence and the ability to do more intricate activities as their coordination and motor skills improve. You may be surprised to see how much your children can do, how excited they are to participate in family life, and how long they can concentrate on a task!

Children look to us as the ultimate models. Everything we do is under scrutiny, whether good or bad. You should already see evidence of this, when they want to do everything that you do! In this way, they discover social norms and expectations, then adapt themselves to be successful in life. We need to support this desire, this natural tendency, by giving them responsibilities and helping them to become a useful part of the family life. If we do not give them any responsibilities, if we continually do for the child when they can do for themselves, they can become accustomed to their impassive role and come to believe that they *can't* do the things that compose everyday life.

Assuming responsibilities at home enhances a child's development, as he begins to view himself as a person who is capable of making a contribution to the family. The child becomes useful and needed at an early age, with the expectation of becoming more self-reliant and independent as time passes. If a child is encouraged to assume responsibilities at an early age, the entire family will then always be involved in the collaborative effort to meet the family's daily need for nourishment, cleanliness, care of clothing, and life in an environment to their liking. Because these needs are real, the child will view his contribution as important. Since the child does not pay the members of his family for their work toward meeting the daily needs, it doesn't make sense that they would pay the child.

Some hints...

- ALWAYS insist that children **wash hands with soap** before handling food and after handling cleaning products. Food should also get an extra wash if possible, after it has been handled by children, as they may be inclined to taste (all of) their work, rescue food from the floor, etc. Children should only use non-toxic or all natural cleaning supplies.
- Do not interrupt or criticize the young child's efforts, as he may not be willing to return to the activity once the interruption has occurred. Re-present the activity if necessary at another time, to increase the possibility of success. Even praise is an interruption of concentration and will interfere with the development of independence and self-esteem. Elementary and middle school children can be coached as they work, so that they can learn how to accomplish a task with success. As the child advances in age, he can continue to maintain some of his past responsibilities as well as assuming new ones; the list is meant to be cumulative, and it is meant to suggest possibilities and to be used as a starting point, customized to your family's lifestyle.
- A large obstacle to the child's work in the home can be accessibility. This can be easily corrected. Some things I recommend are: 1) buy a stable stool that the child can move around the kitchen to reach counters/sink, 2) have a low cupboard devoted specifically to

the child's needs – for example, one place setting for himself, healthy snacks, a small broom/dustpan, cleaning towels, etc.

Before determining how a child will contribute to meeting the family's daily needs, it would be helpful to keep some of the following ideas in mind:

1. Never do anything for a child that he can **do for himself**. If they say “I CAN’T, YOU DO IT!” encourage them to try several more times before you step in. To help, slowly show them how to do it again, then undo your work and have them try. (If needed, put your hands behind your back to keep from reaching in to make something easier! After your hands initially demonstrate, use your words to give hints, IF they ask.) Don’t assume they can’t do it if they show signs of frustration, wait it out... they may just need the security of you being there... it’s likely you will soon hear “I DID IT!”.

2. Remember that this is a **learning process**. Do not focus on the product. Your child will be proud of his accomplishment whether or not the towels are folded exactly right, his shoes are on the right feet, or the cheese is cut in same-sized pieces. If this time they really make an effort but only sweep up half of the mess, maybe next time they will be able to get a little more into the dustpan.

3. **Observe** your child through the process. You will gain insight about whether a task is at his level. If he completes the task very easily, or if he is concentrating on speed more than quality of work, it may be below his level. If he cannot complete all the steps or his interest/concentration wanes at the end, it may be too complicated. Think of ways to make the job more or less complicated, or concentrate on certain steps that the child had trouble with. For example, if he polishes shoes well, add the job of checking the closets and deciding which shoes need to be done... if he likes peeling vegetables but does not carry out the task through the clean-up part of the process, try giving him only the clean-up part at another time (after you have peeled).

4. Examine your own **standards**. Perhaps you are a perfectionist about your house, feel uncomfortable if things are slightly out of order, or are concerned about what others will think. Learn to accept the house as a place of work and communication for the members, and not as a reflection of your own personal worth. If your child ‘finishes’ a job according to his ability and you feel the need to adjust or finish his work, do so at another time so he does not see you and get discouraged. .

5. Remember you are a model of “**order**” to your child. Do not expect orderliness from them that you do not expect of yourself. Young children (~3 years old) especially thrive on order. If they seem inclined, allow them to line things up, arrange food on serving plates, etc

6. Young children need much more **time** to complete their tasks. Give them the time they need. If only one carrot got peeled, serve that, or wait until the end of the week when there are enough carrots from previous days for everyone. For older children, place appropriate time limits on when a task should be completed. If the child participates in setting these time limits, he will be more willing to meet them.



7. Once the child has mastered a task (i.e. cutting cheese) try varying the task, within the same scope (i.e. cutting bananas after the child peels them, cutting the rind off a melon before slicing, peeling a cucumber before slicing into sticks). Children like the challenge of a new or unusual job.

8. Allow the children **choices** in which jobs, and how many, they would like to do. (Not doing anything is not one of the choices). They must then follow through with their choice or experience consequences. Use common sense in the **number of tasks** expected of each child.

9. Older children should be **consulted** about the jobs that need to be done. After they have helped identify the work, then they must help set the standards for work, and be involved in the evaluation of the completed job.

### HOME RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TWO-YEAR OLDS

1. Picking up unused toys and putting them in the proper place
2. Putting books and magazines in a rack
3. Sweeping the floor with hand broom
4. Placing own napkin, plate, cup and silverware on the table
5. Cleaning up what they have dropped while eating
6. Choosing between two foods for breakfast or choosing from two choices of clothing to wear
7. Clearing own place at the table and putting the dishes on the counter (or in the dishwasher) after clearing the leftovers off the plate with spatula
8. Using the toilet
9. Performing simple hygiene – brushing teeth, washing and drying hands/face, and brushing hair
10. Undressing and dressing self with some help
11. Wiping up own accidents (have special towels – I recommend black! – accessible all the time)
12. Carrying boxed or canned goods from grocery sacks to the proper shelf (or area on floor in front of higher shelf), putting things away on a lower shelf
13. Dusting tables and shelves
14. Emptying wastepaper baskets
15. Watering outside plants
16. Cutting soft fruits/vegetables
17. Spooning food into serving bowls
18. Serving self: spooning food onto plate from serving bowl, pouring into small cup from small pitcher
19. Tearing up lettuce for the salad

### HOME RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THREE- and FOUR-YEAR OLDS

1. Setting the table – with good dishes, too!
2. Putting the groceries away (you can help with sorting by placing items on the checkout conveyor so they are similarly grouped in the bags)
3. Helping with grocery shopping and compiling a grocery list (they can survey the fridge, and/or as needed, place pictures/names of foods onto a shopping list)

4. Polishing shoes/wood and cleaning up afterwards
5. Following a schedule for feeding pets
6. Helping to do yard and garden work—weeding, raking, shoveling
7. Helping to make the beds and vacuuming
8. Helping to do the dishes or filling the dishwasher
9. Dusting the furniture
10. Spreading butter, mayo/mustard on sandwiches
11. Preparing cold cereal
12. Helping to prepare plates of food for the family dinner
13. Making a simple dessert
14. Holding the hand mixer to whip the potatoes or mix up a cake
15. Getting the mail
16. Telling parent his/her whereabouts before going out to play
17. Playing without constant adult supervision and attention
18. Peeling vegetables, cutting soft fruits, juicing oranges
19. Helping to wash a car
20. Sharpening pencils
21. Pouring own drink with appropriately sized pitcher and glasses
22. Wiping down tables
23. Cleaning glass (use vinegar solution or other non-toxic)

### **HOME RESPONSIBILITIES FOR FIVE- and SIX-YEAR OLDS**

1. Helping with meal planning and grocery shopping
2. Making own sandwich or simple breakfast and then cleaning up
3. Preparing the dinner table
4. Feeding pets and cleaning their living area
5. Putting in certain ingredients for a recipe
6. Making bed and cleaning own room
7. Dressing on his/her own and choosing clothes
8. Scrubbing the sink, toilet, and bathtub
9. Learning to tie own shoelaces
10. Separating clothing for washing various loads
11. Folding clean clothes and putting them away
12. Answering the telephone and beginning to dial the phone for use
13. Helping with yard work
14. Paying for small purchases
15. Taking out the garbage
16. Choosing own clothing for the day according to weather
17. Watering plants and flowers
18. Peeling vegetables
19. Cooking simple food (boiled egg, toast)
20. Preparing own school lunch
21. Putting clothes into the dryer
22. Hanging up own clothes in the closet
23. Taking pet for a walk
24. Being responsible for own minor injuries
25. Keeping the garbage container clean
26. Cleaning out inside of car

27. Straightening or cleaning out the silverware drawer
28. Folding napkins properly and setting silverware properly

### **HOME RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SEVEN, EIGHT- AND NINE-YEAR OLDS**

1. Mopping or buffing the floor
2. Cleaning Venetian blinds
3. Running own bath water
4. Helping others with their work when asked
5. Straightening own closet and drawers
6. Shopping for and selecting own clothing and shoes with parent
7. Folding blankets
8. Sewing on buttons
9. Sewing rips in seams
10. Cleaning storage room
11. Cleaning up animal messes in the yard and house
12. Beginning to read recipes and cook for the family
13. Baby sitting for short periods of time, with adult still in the house
14. Cutting flowers and making a centerpiece
15. Painting fence or shelves
16. Helping to write simple letters
17. Helping with cleaning the refrigerator
18. Feeding the baby
19. Writing thank-you notes
20. Bathing younger siblings
21. Polishing silverware, copper, or brass items
22. Cleaning patio furniture

### **HOME RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TEN- AND ELEVEN-YEAR OLDS**

1. Changing sheets on the bed and putting dirty sheets in the hamper
2. Operating the washer and/or dryer
3. Measuring detergent
4. Buying groceries using a list, involving comparative shopping
5. Crossing streets unassisted
6. Preparing pastries from box mixes
7. Preparing family meal
8. Receiving and answering own mail
9. Pouring and making tea and coffee
10. Waiting on guests
11. Planning own birthday or other parties
12. Giving simple first aid
13. Doing neighborhood chores
14. Sewing, knitting, or weaving
15. Doing chores without a reminder
16. Learning about banking
17. Washing the family car
18. Earning own money

19. Being alone at home
20. Handling sums of money up to \$5.00 honestly
21. Packing own suitcase

## **HOME RESPONSIBILITIES FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS**

1. Putting siblings to bed
2. Cleaning pool and pool area
3. Respecting others' property
4. Running own errands
5. Mowing lawn
6. Helping parent build things and doing the family errands
7. Scheduling for himself/herself ample time for studies
8. Buying own sweets or treats
9. Determining how late he/she should stay up during the week, keeping in mind the importance of getting necessary rest
10. Preparing many family meals, using nutritious foods
11. Anticipating the needs of others and initiating the appropriate action
12. Accepting own realistic capabilities and limitations
13. Taking responsibility for own decisions
14. Contributing to mutual respect, loyalty, and honesty in the family