Fostering Responsibility in Children: Chores or Contributions?

Part I

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In many of my workshops and in my clinical practice I have been asked questions about the most effective ways to teach children to be responsible. Frequently, these questions are posed by parents and teachers who are frustrated by children who do not follow through on what is expected. A sample of such questions includes:

"How can I get my son to do his chores? He says I'm always nagging him."

"How can I get my daughter to make her) bed?"

"How can I get my daughter to do her homework?"

"How can I get my son to remember to clean his room?"

"How can I motivate my students to complete their assignments?"

In this and my next column I will describe one approach for teaching children to be responsible, an approach that has the added benefit of fostering an attitude of caring and compassion in our children. The ideas in this column began to take shape from research I did a number of years ago when I asked adults to describe one of their fondest memories of school, a memory in which a teacher said or did something that enhanced their self-esteem. I was somewhat surprised at first by the theme that appeared most often since it was not one that I expected. Before reading further, pause for a moment. What do you think was the most common positive memory that I received in my survey? The answer was when a student was asked to contribute in some manner to the school environment. The following are several representative responses:

"As a first grade student I had the responsibility of raising and lowering the coat closet doors because I was one of the taller boys in the class. This made me feel so good because I was so self-conscious about my height."

"In a one-room school, the teacher had me sit and do spelling with the second graders, once I'd shown some ability in this subject."

"My English teacher asked me to tutor a senior who was about to 'not graduate' because she was failing English grammar. I was in 10th grade."

"In the third grade I was chosen to help get the milk and straws."

"In the 11th grade my art teacher asked me to paint a mural in the school. I still

correspond with her."

As I read these and hundreds of similar responses, I reflected upon why the theme of being asked to help others was so prominent. What I came to realize was that when a child is asked by an adult to help out, it conveys a sense of trust, it serves to nurture responsibility and caring, and it enhances motivation and self-esteem. In my work with youth I also found that engaging them in what I term "contributory activities," that is, activities in which they contribute to the well-being of others or their community, lessens anger and even violence. In this column I will focus on what we can do in the home environment to promote responsibility and caring through these contributory activities. In my next column, especially in light of the alienation and anger felt by many students, I will examine the role of contributory activities in the school setting.

I believe that there is almost an inborn wish in children to assist others and to make a positive difference in their world. I remember that when my sons were only three or four years old and I would go outside to mow the lawn, they would come running out wanting to help push the lawnmower. During the New England autumn, they were eager to use their rakes to help me gather the leaves and pine needles that fell from the many trees that surrounded our house. I recall as a young child the joy of spending several hours in my father's small store in Brooklyn assisting in any manner that I could.

Similarly, I have read of a so-called "helper's high" in adults, a feeling of well-being that is associated with assisting others. Several years ago when I presented a talk at the Million Dollar Round Table, a conference attended by many of the most successful insurance agents in the world, a videotape was shown of a number of agents building a home under the auspices of Habitat for Humanity. The look of joy and satisfaction on the faces of these insurance agents as they worked with the members of the family who would live in this home was very evident. Their joy and contentment was even more apparent at the actual conference when members of the family appeared onstage. As I viewed this scene I could not help but think that for the agents who had volunteered their time to build the house, this accomplishment was equal or greater in satisfaction than the many insurance policies they had sold.

If there is something akin to an inborn need to help and if helping others represents a form of taking responsibility, then why do we hear so often that children are not responsible? Or, asked from a more positive perspective, how can we keep the desire to

contribute alive and well in our youth? How can we create home environments that foster an attitude of compassion and responsibility?

In my workshops I often say, half-kidding, half not, that we make a big mistake as parents. The label that we use to describe responsibilities is one that unfortunately is associated with negative connotations. That label is "chores." Children are often told, "Remember, you must do your chores!" It should not surprise anyone when I say that I have yet to discover a child utter, "I am so fortunate to have chores to do." I recognize that whatever labels we provide will not erase the negative feelings associated with being asked to do what youngsters consider such unimportant, "menial" tasks as cleaning one's room, taking out the garbage, making the bed, or clearing the table. However, guided by the notion that children wish to help, I began to consider ways parents might create an attitude of responsibility that would last a lifetime so that even if children did not always remember to do their chores, we could be assured that they were developing into responsible and compassionate people.

I recommend that from an early age parents designate one or two small tasks for their child to do accompanied by the message, "We need your help." For example, when my sons were young, they were asked to place their dirty clothes in the hamper with the comment, "When you do that, it helps mom and me." Some of you reading this column may wonder, "Is this just a question of semantics? Is there really any difference between asking a child to do a chore versus asking a child to help out?" I believe it is far more than a question of semantics. I think that children are more willing to do things and more likely to develop a responsible attitude, when they feel that they are being helpful. As parents, try it and see what happens. In my interviews with many children and adolescents, I have been impressed with how exhilarating the feeling of making a difference can be. Children who believe that what they do has an impact and that their actions better the lives of others are more likely to develop a positive self-image and a sense of confidence. Even as adults, don't we find it gratifying when we have this kind of impact on the lives of others?

Consequently, as our children grow, we must provide them with ample opportunities to make a difference. We must always remember that we serve as very significant models in this task. For instance, I frequently ask children what helping activities have they seen their parents involved with in the past few months. I would not want children to answer that their parents are out every evening engaged in different committees or other community activities

since that would indicate that the parents spend little time with them. However, it is reassuring to hear children describe the involvement of their parents in at least one town or city committee or one charity or as a coach in a youth sport. I think it is sad when children cannot think of one example of their parents contributing to the community.

Another question I like to ask children is what activities have they and their families been involved with that have been of help to others. For the parents reading this column, how would your children answer that question? How would you hope they answered? I advocate parents taking even their young children to assist at a soup kitchen or accompany them as they deliver meals to the elderly or join them in Walks for Hunger, Walks for AIDS, or other charities. In my clinical practice I have seen many children and adolescents who had a history of not fulfilling responsibilities; yet, these same youth became increasingly responsible when they recognized that what they were doing made a contribution to others. It is little wonder that the most frequently cited positive memory of school was when a child was entrusted with the responsibility of helping others.

In understanding how responsible our children truly are, I have found it useful to take a "helicopter view." As parents, look at your children's lives from a perspective that allows you to see where they have been, where they are at currently, and where you hope they go. Examine how responsible they are from this vantage point. What most parents discover is that the bed that is not made consistently or the trash that is not emptied consistently pales in comparison to the many responsibilities that our children do fulfill. From this helicopter view, one can also observe that there are certain activities that we should insure are part of our children's lives since they are far more influential than others in reinforcing lifelong attitudes of responsibility, kindness, self-esteem, and motivation. They are activities in which our children learn the importance of giving of themselves to others, of knowing that because they are on this earth the world is a better place.

As you take this helicopter ride, ask yourself, "Am I providing opportunities for my children to be helpful and to learn that their actions make a positive difference in the lives of others?" This may be one of the most important questions you can ask in guiding you to raise responsible children.