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5 ways to teach your kids responsibility

By Michael Ungar

Are your kids being frivolous? Use your parenting skills and help them learn to appreciate what they have.

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What our kids really need

We need to provide our children (rich or poor) with opportunities to grow through exposure to manageable amounts of risk and responsibility. For example, offering to pay a child's way to work at a summer camp for children with disabilities in the French Alps would be a far more generous offer by a parent than the week-long funfest most are willing to finance. Insisting a child use his or her car to deliver pizza or newspapers in order to pay their own insurance is one way to teach responsibility and to make a child value what he or she owns.

For parents who have the resources to provide for their children, it is important that they provide wisely. Here are a few suggestions based on my own work with families who have had to teach their children how to be their best selves in spite of their wealth and privilege:

- 1. Don't buy it unless they need it.** Let children buy what they need themselves by providing them with an allowance or, when older, helping them find work.
- 2. Buy what they don't need** (like a special designer piece of clothing, an expensive piece of sports equipment, or electronics item) **only when you are confident that the child isn't using the purchase to say something about herself.** Remember, when our possessions become crutches for self-definition, we quickly find ourselves forgetting who we really are.
- 3. Provide children opportunities to make a contribution.** Communities have lots of space for young people who want to give something of themselves to others.
- 4. Provide opportunities for children to experience lots of different types of people.** Remember, they need practice fitting in if they are going to acquire the skills they need to convince others they are worth knowing on their own terms.
- 5. Give of your time more than your pocketbook.** When love is in short supply, children will always choose a parent's attention over something bought at the store.

It all comes back to finding something powerful to say about ourselves. The things we own will come and go, but the feeling of accomplishment that comes with earning something endures. Earning something means assuming responsibility. And it is only through experiences of risk and responsibility that children find ways to hear that they belong, are trustworthy, respected, and competent. Ironically, we need to *reinvent risk* in the lives of our most privileged children in order to provide them with the building blocks for success.

[Click here for tips on when to give kids allowances -- and how much.](#)



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