

RAISING KIDS

How to Get Your Kids to Stop Losing Their Stuff Without Losing Your Mind

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“What do you mean you don’t know where your new shoes are? You haven’t even had them for a week!” I screamed at my daughter as steam seeped out of my ears and my face burned with rage.

Did I lose my temper in that moment? Yes. Did I feel badly about it? Only partially.

I was furious that my daughter had no idea where her sneakers were – sneakers that I had ordered only a few days earlier. She went to camp the previous day with them on, but now she had no idea where they were. It’s frustrating to have something you pay a decent amount of money for vanish into thin air.

On top of that, I discovered they were missing two minutes before we needed to walk out the door to get to camp in the morning. Just a little bit stressful.

I threw a fit. My reaction to a five-year-old losing a material item was definitely overblown (I know, it’s just stuff). But I also know that if she doesn’t learn that this is a big deal, she may never learn to take responsibility for her belongings.

I joked that she would have to find a way to earn the money to pay for new shoes. The bewildered look I got in return meant it was time to explore the best ways to teach young children responsibility to avoid that stressful scenario again.

Expectations

Are my expectations too high? According to child psychologist Cheryl Gilbert MacLeod interviewed by [Today's Parent](#), young children are focused on so many things at once that it is common for them to lose their gear. We can expect children up to age six to lose their belongings at times.

When they enter elementary school, they can begin to take on more responsibility and understand consequences for their actions. Set some rules with them about which items you will replace, how many times you will replace them, and any other sacrifices they will have to make, such as doing chores to “earn” things or giving up certain privileges.

Some kids may be naturally organized, but for the most part, it is up to us to teach them how to keep track of their things and to realize the importance of responsibility. How can we help teach our children about responsibility, respect, and the value of a dollar?

Practical solutions

Let's start with some practical solutions to help our children keep better track of their belongings.

Set reminders based on their schedule

Talk to your children about their daily schedule and point out important actions to take throughout the day, such as putting their lunchbox back into their backpack after their lunch period, putting their clothes in their backpack after a swim lesson, and keeping track of their water bottle throughout the day.

Ask them to double check that they have all their belongings before they leave school or camp at the end of the day. Forming these habits based on a consistent routine can be very effective and used in so many other situations down the road.

Label everything

Although it's a time investment up front, labeling your children's belongings provides an insurance policy in case they do forget or misplace something. Hopefully someone will find the lost item and take it to the lost and found so that you can retrieve it later. You can simply use a Sharpie marker or purchase some name labels online.

Make a checklist

Work with your children to write a list of their key belongings – such as a lunchbox, sweatshirt, sunglasses, hat, homework folder – that they need to make sure they have before they leave the house in the morning and before they come home at the end of the day.

Review this list over and over again with them until it is ingrained in their memory. Be sure to review the list together so that you are also checking that they have everything they need.

Prompt them with specific questions

Yes, parents are known to nag, but it is necessary at times. Be proactive by asking them questions based on the checklist you created: “Do you have your hat and sunglasses for the day? Don't forget to put them in your backpack when you're not using them.”

Eventually, they will hear your questions enough that they will come up with them on their own.

Make it fun

[Today's Parent](#) offers a really clever tip: Try teaching your kids a catchy song, cheer, or acronym to remember their gear.

Lessons for a lifetime

The simple act of my daughter losing her new sneakers at camp prompted some important lessons that she can carry with her for a lifetime. Although I did not handle the moment as calmly as I should have, my daughter got the message that she was irresponsible and that her actions had consequences.

First, she felt uneasy that I was scolding her. She prefers a happy mommy. Second, she needed to understand that I was not going to immediately hop on Amazon and re-order those same 45-dollar shoes just because she loved them. (That day she wore her old, beat up, slightly-too-small sneakers that she was so happy to leave behind when the new ones arrived.) And when I asked her how she

was going to earn the money to order new shoes, she realized that so much of what she has and loves costs money, and that needs to be earned by hard work.

I knew that if I simply “came to the rescue,” my daughter would grow up expecting this in life. There has been a lot of talk about entitled children lately. These children grow up feeling privileged because their parents believe that they should be happy all the time and never face consequences for their actions.

Marsha B. Sauls, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist, explains that these children become belligerent, angry, lazy, selfish, incapable of planning ahead, and unable to understand how their behavior and choices impact others.

Instead, I am trying to raise responsible children who understand that there are consequences for their actions. This means my children won’t always be completely happy. They won’t automatically get things just because they want them. It’s not just that I want my kids to be responsible for materials things; responsibility impacts so many aspects of their lives.

If they learn to take care of their own toys and clothes now, then they will respect other people and their stuff, too. They will grasp the value of working hard to be able to pay for things, which will help them manage their time and money more wisely. They will also begin to see the importance of helping people who do not have nearly as much as they do.

Finally, they will feel empowered and develop self-esteem because they have control over their own behavior, which can help them achieve their goals and desires throughout life.

Back to those shoes. I am happy to report that we found the sneakers in a bin in the hallway at camp. But my son just lost his sweatshirt....

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