

Becoming Responsible Consumers

Being a responsible consumer is about preserving the planet's resources for the next generation, so it makes sense to start showing children how to make good choices when they're young. Adults can model for them the three familiar Rs: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle, and add three more Rs: Refuse, Rethink rewards, and Repair.

Refuse

We are bombarded by advertising that tells us to buy, "you deserve it!" We are urged to buy *more*, "why not?" But if we want to consume less of the Earth's resources, we need to be able to refuse to follow these ads blindly. Children aren't able to evaluate products they see advertised. We can demonstrate to them some important questions to answer before buying something, either for them or for the family.

- Does this fill a **need**? Or do we already have something that serves the same purpose?
- Can we **afford** this? And if we can, where does it fit on the list of priorities in our family's budget?
- **How long** will this be useful to us? Will it still be interesting next month, or next year?
- How long will it last before breaking? And if it breaks, can it be **repaired**?
- Could we buy this **second hand**, and then pass it on to someone else when we're through?

After answering these questions, it may become clear that we should refuse to buy, in spite of attractive advertising. When children are young, it is adults who will do the refusing. Gradually, as children learn to analyse advertising, they will participate in these decisions too.

Reduce

By refusing things we can't afford and don't need, we will reduce what our families accumulate. We can reduce even more by borrowing something instead of purchasing, particularly if it won't be needed for very long. For instance, baby equipment can often be borrowed from friends or family members. Books can be borrowed from the library. Toys that a child might use for only a few months can be borrowed from a toy library, then traded for a toy that suits the next stage of development. In areas where there is no nearby toy library, some parents set up a toy exchange with other families in their neighbourhood or at their child care centre.

Rethink rewards

Sometimes children have become used to receiving gifts as rewards for good behaviour. They may already measure their success by the number of new things they have. When we start practising refuse and reduce, these children may feel like they're being punished. To change their perspective, we will need to rethink rewards and find other ways to let children know we appreciate their efforts and their behaviour. For instance, a child could be given the privilege of choosing the menu for a family celebration meal. This reward makes a child feel special without costing any extra money or adding anything to the pile of toys that have to be put away. We can also reward children with time spent together playing in the park or working on a hobby. At the same time, this sends a powerful message about where the family places its values.

Reuse

With growing children, it often makes sense to buy second hand toys, sports equipment and clothing at consignment shops or garage sales. This way we reduce both new purchases and garbage. Reusing can also mean finding new uses for things instead of throwing them out. An old shirt becomes a painting smock; a cardboard refrigerator box turns into a wonderful playhouse.

Repair

If a toy is broken or clothing is torn, we should first consider whether it can be repaired, before we throw it out and add to the garbage problem. Can we glue it, repaint it, sew it or patch it to extend its usable life? Can we involve children in the repair process so they learn problem solving skills at the same time? Here's a hint for parents who aren't particularly handy with tools: duct tape comes in lots of bright colours and can work wonders to make toys, lunch bags and books last longer.

Recycle

Once we have refused, reduced, repaired and reused, recycling is the last step in the chain of teaching children to care for the Earth's resources. They can be involved in sorting paper, bottles and cans for municipal recycling programs. (Watch out for sharp edges.) If you have a backyard composter, they will be fascinated to see vegetable scraps turn into soil they can spread on the garden.

In the long run, it is our children who will reap the rewards of lessening our impact on the planet.

by Betsy Mann