

The Sequence of Personal Responsibility

RON HASKINS

SENIOR FELLOW AND CO-DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER ON CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION AND
SENIOR CONSULTANT AT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



Personal responsibility is the willingness to both accept the importance of standards that society establishes for individual behavior and to make strenuous personal efforts to live by those standards. But personal responsibility also means that when individuals fail to meet expected standards, they do not look around for some factor outside themselves to blame. The demise of personal responsibility occurs when individuals blame their family, their peers, their economic circumstances, or their society for their own failure to meet standards. The three areas of personal decision-making in which the nation's youth and young adults most need to learn and practice personal responsibility are education, sexual behavior and marriage, and work.

In the last two decades, the idea that public policy should emphasize the importance of personal responsibility has become popular among both Republicans and Democrats. Not long ago, many critics held that the nation's social policy expected too little of those it was designed to assist. Basing policy on the expectation of personal responsibility means that government must spend money

to help people, to be sure, but government programs must also expect that individuals will make wise decisions and then make every effort to implement their decisions. More than a decade ago, Larry Mead of New York University called this movement the “new paternalism.” By this label he meant that government would organize programs to send a clear, value-based message of expected behavior and then arrange consequences for those who ignore the message. An important and somewhat controversial aspect of paternalism is that government decides, based on an appeal to traditional or widely accepted values, what good choices are and then ensures that people are rewarded for the right choice or punished for the wrong choice, all the while emphasizing that individuals are responsible for their own behavior.

When applied to education, personal responsibility means that students accept the responsibility to study hard and to learn as much as they can in courses that press against the limits of their capacity. For most students, this aspect of personal responsibility means that they must take courses that prepare them for college. Hard work is a must because the single most accurate predictor of college performance is high school grade point average, probably because grades reflect both capacity and hard work. Students who choose not to prepare for college must prepare for the world of work, a goal that also requires strenuous personal effort. Students who do not go to college should enroll in training courses after high school. Without job training, an apprenticeship, or a two-year or four-year degree, most young people are destined to a life of marginal employment and income.

When applied to sex and marriage, personal responsibility means that young people should avoid sex until at least high school graduation or entry to college. Many adults argue that young people

should wait even longer. Parents, teachers, ministers, and other authority figures should send an unambiguous message that the best choice for all adolescents is to just say no. When young people do initiate sex at whatever age that might be, personal responsibility means taking all necessary measures to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Both research and centuries of human experience show that single parenthood is difficult for both parents and children alike. Nonmarital births, which are almost always caused by a lack of commitment to moral norms or by inability to act responsibly in light of those norms, bring a new dimension to personal responsibility because the future of three people are implicated, one of whom has no voice. Regardless of the decisions young people make about age of sexual debut, personal responsibility and the needs of society require that pregnancy and child birth occur within the context of a loving marriage.

At the crescendo of his astonishing inaugural address, President Obama called the nation's attention to "a new era of responsibility." What did he mean? At minimum, he meant that young Americans should be guided by a clear and straightforward set of goals: finish your education, get a job, get married, and only then have children — and get the sequence right. After that, everything is possible.

*Ron Haskins is a senior fellow in the Economic Studies Program and co-director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution and senior consultant at the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore, MD. He is the author of *Work Over Welfare: The Inside Story of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law* (Brookings, 2006) and a senior editor of *The Future of Children*. Haskins lives with his wife in Rockville, MD and is the father of four grown children.*