

A Simple Definition?

KAY S. HYMOWITZ

WILLIAM E. SIMON FELLOW, THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE



In the political world, personal responsibility has been shorthand. It refers, in a general way, to self-sufficiency. The official name of the welfare reform bill, where the phrase has figured most prominently, was The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. The name was a response to one of the chief criticisms of welfare: that it promoted dependency on government, or to put it a little differently, on tax-paying fellow citizens. This dependency was precisely the opposite of what the Founders had in mind. They not only wanted self-government, in the sense of political independence; they wanted citizens who were capable of self-governing. The idea behind welfare reform was to change what critics felt to be incentives that led people to become dependent on government payments — thereby shifting responsibility for themselves to others — and to promote, instead, work which would lead to individual self-sufficiency. People who had formerly been dependents would become responsible for supporting themselves, i.e. personally responsible.

In more informal conversation, personal responsibility has slightly different connotations. It refers to taking blame for your mistakes. But there is a big assumption behind this meaning of personal responsibility as it relates to the first meaning. When someone accepts responsibility for a misstep, that person also

understands him or herself to be either in charge of their own life or capable of taking charge in the future. This also hints at self-awareness; that is, understanding one's personal actions and their consequences. It suggests mindfulness; thinking through our actions rather than simply behaving impulsively or emotionally.

These are qualities that don't come naturally to human beings; this is why children can't be independent, because they are not yet fully responsible. It takes time and training to learn to be self-aware, mindful, and self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency depends on a degree of experience in making decisions and in facing their consequences. Hence, the American tradition of a long period of childhood during which children make their own decisions first on small matters — what clothes to wear on a certain day — and then on larger matters — what courses to take in school until they have learned to be completely self-sufficient.

The two meanings of personal responsibility suggest some strengths and weaknesses in using the idea as a framework for attacking the problem of unplanned pregnancy. On the one hand, insofar as personal responsibility implies self-awareness and mindfulness, it is a useful way of talking. In particular, it helps explain why teenagers should not have children for the reasons I discussed in my previous paragraph. It could even be a way of highlighting the importance of deliberativeness for grown women — and men — in their twenties.

But personal responsibility poses some problems as a way of understanding teen or unplanned pregnancy. According to *Time*, the teenagers who got pregnant in Gloucester thought they were being responsible and mature because they were having their children; perhaps they had made a mistake — getting pregnant before they should have — but they were now going to “step up.” The

consequences of welfare reform also provide a cautionary tale. Women who had formerly depended on government welfare did take more personal responsibility. They got jobs. They stopped going to welfare offices. Many of them moved out of poverty. But despite the hopes of the architects of the 1996 bill, they continued to have unplanned pregnancies, that is, to have babies in their twenties outside committed, long-term relationships with their children's fathers. According to the principle of personal responsibility, then, the Gloucester girls and single, low income mothers who are no longer on welfare are a complete success. I would guess that few Americans would agree.

Kay S. Hymowitz is the William E. Simon fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a contributing editor of City Journal. She writes extensively on education and childhood in America and is the author of Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age and Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age. Ms. Hymowitz has also written for many major publications including The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The New Republic, New York Newsday, The Public Interest, Commentary, Dissent, and Tikkun.