

Kids and Chores

Most parents want children to help around the house. They believe helping will build life skills, contribute to the family, increase a child's self-esteem, and reduce the parents' workload. However, getting kids started with chores often seems daunting and parents wonder if the effort is worth it. The answer: YES!

Why bother with chores?

Using measures of individual success such as completion of education, getting started on a career path, relationships with family and friends, and not using drugs, University of Minnesota professor Marty Rossmann determined that the best predictor of adults' success in their mid-20s was that they started participating in household tasks at age 3 or 4. As a predictor of success, whether children did chores, and the family attitudes and motivators related to chores are more important than parenting styles, IQ, gender, and types of tasks.

How tasks are presented makes a difference:

- **Chores should not be overwhelming.** Let children master one task before adding another.
- **Tasks should be taught in the child's learning style.** In other words, demonstrate and provide hands-on practice for the child who learns by doing (kinesthetic) and explain the steps for a child with an auditory learning style.
- **Involve children in choosing which chores they do.**
- **Tasks should not be related to an allowance.** Kids should not expect payment for sharing the work of a household.

The earlier parents get children to take an active role in the household, the easier it will be to keep them involved as teens.

Chores teach important life skills

- **Self-motivation:** To take a job (task) and carry it through regardless of whether it is enjoyable.
- **Prioritizing:** If kids are going to do both what they want and chores, they must plan ahead.
- **Organizational skills:** Define a task, learn the necessary skills, do the job, tidy up after the job.

In *How Much Is Enough?* Jean Clarke cites research that shows how those who were overindulged in childhood by not being required to do household

chores experience pain in adulthood due to lack of skills, low self-esteem, and a sense of entitlement.

What can parents expect about chores?

What chores you can expect a child to complete depends on the child's developmental stage, temperament, experience, and interest.

Developmental stages: Most children have the physical ability to do a task before they have the emotional ability to complete the task alone. Think in terms of three stages:

- Child helps. The parent does the planning and motivation, and the child does part of the work.
- Child needs reminding or supervision. Adult and child share planning and motivation. Child completes the task with supervision.
- Child works independently. The child does the planning, motivation, and work (including clean up).



As Figure 1 shows, it may take years—rather than weeks or months—to progress between stages. Suggested age-appropriate chores are listed in Figure 2 (next page). Remember that older children may need to learn some prerequisite skills before they can do tasks listed for their age.

Temperament affects chores: Inborn temperament traits may affect a child's ability to do chores. Consider your child's temperament and what skills he or she will need to be successful. For example, children with high activity levels can channel that energy into sweeping or raking leaves. Both highly distractable and low persistent children need to be taught how to focus on a task. Praise and rewards often help.

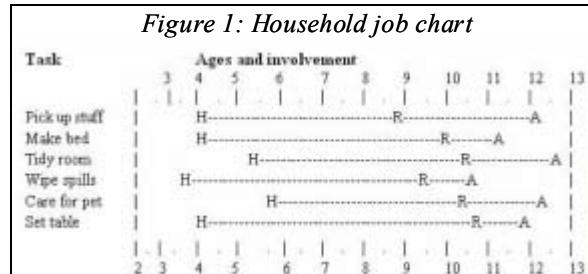
Interest and experience: Children's interests also affect what they are willing to learn; a child may not want to carry out trash but may be willing to vacuum. When a child expresses interest in a task, take the opportunity to teach what's involved.

Getting chores started

Introducing children to chores is a process, not a one-time task. Parents need realistic expectations and the patience to help children develop skills over time. Making a child proficient at a household task involves:

1. **Making the job clear.** Kids are more likely to do a good job when an adult explains ex-

Figure 1: Household job chart



actly what is expected. Be sensitive to the child's age, temperament, and experience. To introduce a task:

- **Get the child's attention.** Put the two of you on the same eye level. Remember the importance of learning styles.
- **Be specific.** "Clean your room" might mean "Put dirty clothes in the hamper, toys and books on shelf, and the bedspread pulled up."
- **Set a deadline.** For young children, an event may be better than a specific hour: "so we can go to park," "before lunch," or "immediately after dinner."

2. Offer a few choices. Children are more likely to participate if they feel they have input in the assignment. ("Do you want to empty the trash or set the table?" "Do you want to clean alone or do you want me to help?" "Do you want to pick two chores or do you want me to assign them?")

3. Create reminder systems.

Two useful ones:

- **Reminder to do the task:** timer, a warning song, progress poster, string tied around the finger.

- **Reminder to do all the task:** help cards, five-finger check (see Figure 3), score card for task.

4. Provide support.

- **Be available to help.** Many children find it easier to do a task themselves if they have permission to ask for help.

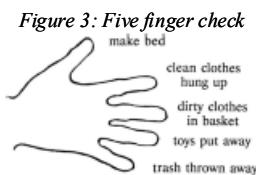
• Reward the desired behavior.

- Rewards can be immediate (a sticker) or something the child works toward (a later bedtime, a trip to a ball game).

- Reward responsibility and initiative more than obedience. If you offer your child one sticker for picking up her toys when reminded, give her two for picking them up on her own.

- Remember to reward yourself, too!

5. Model making jobs fun. Show kids how to enjoy what must be done. A playful attitude is helpful. Pretend someone fun (dinosaur king, Power Ranger, fairy princess) is coming and you are getting ready. Be silly. Use tongs or mittens to put things away. It may slow things down but makes it fun. Make a game. Put a basketball hoop over a clothes hamper and let the child make "baskets" with his or her dirty clothes. Turn on lively music and work to that. Beat your record. Try to clean the room faster than last time.



6. Establish consequences. Clarify consequences before a child slips up. Use only consequences that you will impose with consistency. Ask more experienced children to predict your response. For example, "What do you think will happen if the timer rings and your room is still messy?" or "What will I answer if you ask to have a friend overnight and your room is not clean?"

Other Resources

Pick Up Your Socks...and Other Skills Growing Children Need by Elizabeth Crary

How Much Is Enough? by Jean Illsley Clarke, Connie Dawson and David Bredehoft

Temperament Tools: Working With Your Child's Inborn Traits by Helen Neville and Diane Clark Johnson

Involving Children in Household Tasks: Is It Worth the Effort? by Marty Rossman, <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/Pubs/ResearchWorks/Rossmann.html>

Figure 2: Possible tasks for different ages (after skills are taught)

Ages 2 and 3

Many toddlers want to help, but their "help" may not be useful. Keep their interest alive by involving them where you can.

- Help feed pets
- Help wipe up messes
- Shred lettuce for salad by hand
- Help mix ingredients
- Help make the bed
- Help pick up toys and books
- Put dirty clothes in the hamper when asked

Ages 6-8

School-aged children may have outgrown their interest in chores, however they do want to be independent. They may need reminding. They can handle the preceding tasks as well as:

- Help care for pets
- Empty garbage
- Make a snack
- Empty the dishwasher
- Fold and put away laundry
- Clean the car interior
- Water the garden

Ages 4 and 5

Preschoolers often like learning new chores when they are clearly explained. Capitalize on this and create a routine for chores. Besides the preceding, they can:

- Pull covers up on bed
- Set the table
- Help clear the table (non-breakable items)
- Help prepare food
- Put shoes away

Ages 9-12

Preteens are capable of more responsibility if you provide structure. Find a system that works for your family and change it only with input from all directly affected. Preteens can handle all of the preceding tasks as well as:

- Prepare simple meals
- Clean kitchen counters, sink, and bathroom, vacuum
- Load the dishwasher.
- Pack their own lunches
- Operate the washer and dryer
- Rake leaves