

HOUSEHOLD CHORES FOR CHILDREN: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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Even though most parents in the United States require their children to perform some form of chores, you may often ask yourself why bother? It sometimes seems that it takes more time and effort to supervise children through the chores than it would take to do them yourself. Still, performing household chores can play several very important roles in your child's development:

- Chores teach children some of the basic skills for living independently, such as cleaning, cooking, or doing laundry.
- Chores teach children to become competent contributors to the family's operation.
- Chores help children develop basic work attitudes and habits such as responsibility, reliability, initiation, thoroughness, and persistence. These skills generalize to schoolwork and later to employment, and form the building blocks for success as an adult.
- Chores done by children give parents the opportunity to express their appreciation for their children's help in naturally occurring situations. This forms the foundation of self-confidence, and also brings the family together in a bond of mutual support and caring.

The importance of parental expectations such as doing chores has been highlighted in a recent national survey of more than 270,000 teenagers. More than three fourths of the adolescents surveyed cited clear and appropriate expectations and standards for accomplishments as key to their later success in life.

Development

Children can begin to help with household chores as soon as their motor development allows them to do so, usually by the age of 3. In fact, children at this age often seek out and enjoy helping and imitating their parents in household tasks. Early chores should involve a cooperative effort with close parental supervision. As children mature in age and competence, you can reduce your direct involvement. In general, the progression of chores moves from simple to complex, and also from chores that focus on self-care to chores that help the immediate and even the extended family. Examples are included in the table at the end of this handout.

Establishing chores that are appropriate for your child's age and skill level is important. Start with relatively short and simple tasks, then progress to tasks that are more complex and offer a mild challenge. Demonstrate the task first, providing pointers and reasons for why you do a thing a certain way. As your child begins to learn the task, offer more encouragement and recognition than direction. Even if your child's work is barely adequate, he or she will be motivated to improve the quality of the work over time if you give positive recognition because your child will feel proud and appreciated for the effort.

What I Can Do as a Parent

- Recognize that assigning chores is an essential task of parenting. In doing so, you help your children to learn that they can make an important and useful contribution to the care and support of the people they love.
- Acknowledge your children for their work, both their effort and their actual contribution. Point out what has been improved by their effort, so they can begin to develop their own self-appraisal skills.
- Begin by assigning only one or two chores. Choose chores that are relatively easy to do, and that may hold some interest for your children.

- Try to find a way to include your children in tasks if they show an interest in helping you with chores that are beyond their abilities. This will begin developing a sense of competence and confidence.
- Try to find chores that can be done daily to establish a routine and make it easier for your children (and you) to remember.
- Don't expect your children to remember chores without prompting. This will only lead to frustration for you and discouragement for your children. Instead, consider ways to cue them about their chores, such as notes left in common areas or a regular time for checking in about chores each day. Some parents find it useful to use a chore chart, placed in a prominent place such as the refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or the child's bedroom door. (See "Resources" below for a website where you can print charts for various ages.) Involve your children in evaluating and checking off the work that they have completed, so that standards for performance as well as a sense of accomplishment can be developed.
- Prepare a list with choices for selection if your children want variety, or make a job jar from which your children can draw from slips of paper that list the various chore options.
- Post an enlarged photo of the room when it is clean for chores such as cleaning the kitchen or bedroom. Your children can use this as a visual check of what the finished chore looks like.
- See that a chore is completed. If you let your children avoid the chore, then the importance of the chore is diminished in their eyes and your credibility with them is reduced. Take whatever time is needed to supervise them to the successful completion of the task. Resistance will reduce over time when your children see that you are firm in your expectations.
- Make sure that chores are completed before play is allowed. This, of course, will depend on what has to be done, but children will feel more relaxed and positive if the chores are completed first. Some children prefer a break or snack before launching into chores or homework after school. If you agree to this, make explicit plans for when the chores will begin.
- Assign chores so that both sons and daughters have equal opportunity to learn an array of skills. Both boys and girls need to be familiar with meal preparation, laundry, household repair, auto maintenance, cleaning, and other survival skills.

Paying for Chores

Most experts oppose making allowance contingent on chore completion, because both allowance and chore completion teach important skills. However, your

decision will depend on your beliefs, values, and experience as a child. Some parents believe that this pairing prepares children for responsible wage earning as adults. Other parents see chores as contributions to the family functioning and a shared responsibility and not a job for pay. Some families use a combination of the two, in an arrangement that gives an allowance that is not connected to chore completion but also requires certain chores as a contribution to the family operations. Additional tasks might be available to earn extra money *after* regular chores are completed. This plan can be especially effective if the child is saving for a special item.

Whichever system you choose to develop with your children, it is important that you form it clearly in your own mind and then explain it to your children in language that is appropriate for their age level. For example, a 5-year-old may be satisfied with the explanation, "Everybody has a job to help out the family. I appreciate it when you do yours." An older child can appreciate a more detailed explanation of how the chore fits into the general family maintenance, and what benefits can be reaped from the experience.

If you do give allowance, pay, or other tangible rewards for chore completion, be sure to combine it with verbal recognition and specific, positive acknowledgement of what was accomplished. If you pay for chores, make the amount explicit and clarify if you will be paying for completion of all of the chores. Be sure to honor your agreement if the chore is completed satisfactorily, regardless of any other misbehavior that has occurred separate from the chore. If the misbehavior is unrelated to the chore, then set a separate consequence for the misbehavior.

Summary

Chores offer an excellent opportunity to teach responsibility and family values and to strengthen bonds of mutual respect and caring with your child. With patience and support, you can foster independence, competence, self-worth, and initiative in accomplishing important life skills.

Resources

- Barnes, B. (1996). *Ready for responsibility* (rev. ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. ISBN: 0310201357.
In addition to basic ideas about chores, offers long lists of specific chores that are appropriate for different age levels.
- Coyle, T. (1997). *Children & chores*. Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University Cooperative Extension.
Available: www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt

- Eyre, L., & Eyre, R. (1994). *Teaching your children responsibility*. New York: Fireside. ISBN: 0671887165.
Offers many creative and down-to-earth ideas for teaching responsibility through home chores, and structures them into a 12-month rotating program that can be adjusted for age level.
- Goodale, G. (1997, October 20). Return of chores: Kids meet the broom. *Christian Science Monitor*. Available: <http://csmweb2.emcweb.com>
- Pearl, J. (1999). *Kids and money: Giving them the savvy to succeed financially*. Princeton, NJ: Bloomberg. ISBN: 1576600645.
Excellent volume on children and money in general. Includes a comprehensive chapter on children and work.
- Rosemond, J. (1989). *John Rosemond's six-point plan for raising healthy children*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews & McMeel. ISBN: 0836228065.
Very readable guide for instilling responsibility and self-discipline in children.

Websites

Epinions—www.epinions.com

Offers brief articles on specific ideas related to chores that have been used successfully by parents, and also posts comments from other parents about their experiences with these ideas.

ParenTime's Printable Checklists—

www.printablechecklists.com

Offers a variety of downloadable checklists for weekly chores that are specific for age groups, as well as blank forms and a form with picture cues that is appropriate for non-readers.

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Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Chores

Age	Appropriate chores
Preschool (age 3–5)	<p>Focus on immediate self-care and imitation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dressing• Pick up toys• Feed pet• Help clear the table• Simple cleaning tasks• Helping or imitating parent with other tasks
Early elementary (age 6–8)	<p>Establish routines for self-care and expand into tasks for family benefit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear and set the table• Empty garbage• Put away clean clothes• Clean bedroom• Simple garden chores such as watering• Feed and groom pets
Later elementary (age 9–11)	<p>Increase self-management and skill level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simple food preparation• Wash the car• Load dishwasher/wash dishes• Simple yard work (raking, etc.)• Full care for pets
Secondary (age 12–18)	<p>Focus on skills for independent living or shared responsibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cooking meals• Laundry• Home repairs and car maintenance• Heavy yard work