

Why Chores Matter

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It was August 1984 when I started my freshman year of college at Iowa State University. My parents helped me move into my dorm room. I had a high school diploma along with more than enough skills to survive on my own. I'm not just talking about the skills needed to succeed academically and socially. I could cook, clean, sew, do laundry, wash my car, change a tire, mow the lawn, and do many other things that made me self sufficient. Where did I learn these skills? From my parents. I'll confess, my mother was a professor of Home Economics Education, but my dad was also a pretty mean cook, did laundry, cleaned the house... If mom left town for a couple of days, the house didn't fall apart.

Fast forward to the present year: 2008. As a busy wife, and mother of a 4-year-old and a 14-year-old, I employ a cleaning lady, a gardener, and a pool service. What happened? Trust me, I am not rich. I have chosen to pay for some services that allow me more time with my family and friends. I also pay to have my car washed and I pay AAA so they'll help me out when I'm stranded. Sound familiar? Am I setting the right example for my children? They rarely clean a bathroom, vacuum a floor, or change a bed. With that being said, that should leave plenty of time for them to help out with other tasks around the house.

So why is it that many of us come home from an already busy day...cook dinner, set the table, clear the table, do the dishes, take out the trash, pick up our children's things, do laundry, bring in the mail, and at some point collapse into bed from exhaustion? What are our children up to? Could they possibly have that much homework?

I took a poll in class recently and it seems that the "I have homework" excuse is working extremely well. Our children have figured out that their academic success is a big priority in our homes, so in turn, the "but I have homework" excuse is working very well at getting them out of helping around the house. It is working so well that some children barely come out of their rooms to eat dinner and once they've finished eating, retreat again.

Are we doing our children any favors? According to many articles I have read lately, that answer would be a big "no."

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article, cites some benefits of doing chores, including:

- The obvious one: self reliance.
- "Pitching in at home" as a "crucial marriage-preservation skill for young men." Men who learn to participate in household chores growing up are more likely to share household chores with their spouse.
- Having a positive impact on future volunteering/community service work.

- And the other obvious one to the parents: a division of labor with all family members participating in running the household

Ideally, we should start dividing up household chores when children are young, Don't write off the older children and teenagers as lost causes if they haven't been participating. If parents show their children the value of helping out or the intrinsic rewards, then children are more likely to get involved. Competition or games can help, as well as rewards for completing chores. Examples of rewards include a treat, free time or money. Be wary of focusing too much on the extrinsic rewards though. They may do the chore just to get the "thing" that comes with the chore's completion. Last, but definitely not least, make sure you thank your child when the task or tasks are completed.

What doesn't work? Nagging, criticism, micromanaging, and redoing "completed" chores. Numerous studies, not to mention personal experience, have shown that these techniques are not effective. Want some excellent examples? Ask your students.

Instead of trying to be Supermom, I've started to get my kids more involved in the running of our household. So what if my 4-year-old makes a huge mess when we cook dinner, or leaves a trail of clothes in the hallway when we do laundry, or smashes a few plants when we're gardening. I know she's learning skills that will help her across her lifetime. I'm still working on the bill paying chore. I know the 14-year-old is highly qualified to write out the checks and mail the bills. After all, she does have better handwriting than her dad, but I'm not sure I'm ready to pass that chore off to her yet. Perhaps we can do it together. For now we'll stick with things like feeding the cats, changing the litter boxes, taking out the trash, and doing laundry. Even then the cats may go a day or two without fresh food and her white clothing may be gray or pink, but it really doesn't matter.

Find out what is happening in your students' households with the following activity ideas. I've brainstormed several ways you can get your students involved. See what works best for your classes.

Activity Ideas:

- Poll your students to see what kinds of chores they do on a regular basis and develop a class master chore chart.
 - Ask them how the chores are being divided up in their families. Does gender play a role in determining who does what tasks?
 - Ask them why they think their parents are having them do those chores.
 - Ask the parents in class for their perspective.
 - Ask students what they have gained from doing those chores.
 - Ask them how they can or have use(d) these household experiences once out on their own.

- Have your students work in “family” groups to develop chore charts for their “family.”
 - Make the “families” different. For example: single parent, two parents with young kids, 2 parents with high school and/or college age kids, 1 parent working, both working
 - Next, have them divide out the chores among the members of their “family”.
 - Have them discuss why they divided the chores the way they did. How does it benefit the family? How does it benefit the individual doing the chore?
 - Make sure to discuss age appropriateness.
- Delve even deeper into what their expectations are for their future mate regarding division of chores around the house.

Let me know how it goes. I'd love to hear how your class interacts and what class/classes you utilized the activities in. Feel free to E-mail me at lledboer@mtsac.edu

References and Resources:

Shellenbarger, Sue. “On the Virtues of Making Your Children Do the Dishes.” Wall Street Journal 27 August 2008: D1.

Online link: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121978677837474177.html>

“Shortcuts for 10 Household Chores”

<http://housekeeping.about.com/od/timesavingideas/a/shortcutsclean.htm>

“How to Assign Household Chores”:

http://www.ehow.com/how_3420_assign-household-chores.html

“Dividing Up Chores”: <http://life.familyeducation.com/marriage/jobs-and-chores/45600.html>

“Kids and Chores: Chilling the Chore Wars”:

<http://www.organizedhome.com/kids-chores-chilling-chore-wars>

“Chores and Your Child: What to Expect and When” (*information for age 2-8*)

http://parentcenter.babycenter.com/0_chores-and-your-child-what-to-expect-and-when_3658995.pc