



Children and Chores

Parents like it when children take responsibility and follow through on chores, but all too often chores lead to complaining, nagging and fights. What can parents do to prevent chore wars?

There are lots of good reasons for having children do chores. The main reason is to help them understand that living in a family involves work and that every member shares the responsibility and the benefits. Sharing the workload helps all family members. When mom or dad can rely on their children to complete certain tasks, their own workload is reduced, leaving them time to spend with each other or their kids.

Two bad reasons for assigning chores to children are to keep kids busy and to punish them. When parents assign chores as busywork or punishment, they send the wrong messages about family responsibilities. Kids who are punished by being assigned a chore begin to hate household work. They also begin to trade punishments - choosing to skip a television program instead of raking the yard.

Chores help children become responsible and self-reliant. A teenager who knows how to launder clothes correctly does not have to depend on dad or mom to wash his jeans for tonight's dance. When kids complete tasks successfully, they not only learn useful skills but also develop a sense of responsibility as well. When parents recognize and appreciate the important contribution children make to the family, they help kids feel lovable and capable. Here are some guidelines for assigning chores.

Give children chores that are age-appropriate.

It's important to assign jobs that kids are able to do. Avoid overwhelming them with too many tasks or tasks that are too difficult. Even young children can have family jobs like sorting socks or setting the table.

Give children responsibilities that are important.

Everyone wants to do work that is meaningful and purposeful. Children resent being given busywork such as pulling weeds in a part of the garden that is usually not weeded. They also resent being given jobs that no one else wants to do like emptying the cat's litter box. If you want kids to feel they are an important part of the family, give them important things to do.

Teach them how to start and complete chores.

Parents and children are easily frustrated when chores are not done correctly or at all. On the other hand, when kids know how to do something well, they are more likely to accept greater responsibility. Parents should help kids become successful by teaching them the right way to do things. If you want the lawn cut a certain way, show your daughter how. If you want your two-year-old to put his toys away, teach him how.

Give children time to learn.

Parents should resist the temptation to take over and do things when children make mistakes.

Likewise, avoid doing something over when your child hasn't done it just right. These actions reveal a lack of trust and confidence that affects your child's self-confidence. While it may be easier and quicker to do things yourself, you're not helping your child learn useful skills and become a confident, competent individual.

Give children a choice of chores.

Everyone likes to have say in the work he does. Children are more likely to follow through on chores they have chosen. Post a sign-up sheet on the refrigerator and have everyone (parents included) pick a chore by a certain deadline. Hold a family meeting to discuss what needs to be done each week and who will do what.

Make chores fun.

Play some lively music while the family is doing chores. Make certain chores, like picking up toys, a contest or race. Assigning chores, especially undesirable ones, can be a game as well. Write unpleasant tasks on slips of paper and put them in a job jar. Everyone picks a chore at random out of the job jar. Job jars are also good for those chores that are only done occasionally like painting or spring-cleaning. Or make a work wheel out of large and small paper plates. Write the names of all family members on the smaller plate and chores along the edge of the bigger plate. Put the smaller plate in the center of the bigger plate and secure it with a brass fastener. Turn it weekly to assign everyone a new set of chores.

Don't mix chores with other responsibilities.

Kids have many responsibilities at home and at school. Like parents, they have to learn how to manage and balance these competing demands. Homework or extracurricular participation should not become an excuse for not being a responsible family member. There are times when schoolwork or other responsibilities like practice take precedence, but parents should still expect children to be contributing family members. There may need to be task or timetable adjustments, but kids should know they have family responsibilities too.

Try to avoid rewarding kids for doing chores.

Chores should be the routine responsibilities individuals do to keep the family functioning smoothly. Usually, chores include jobs like laundry, meal preparation, shopping, cleaning, taking out the garbage, taking care of the pets, mowing the lawn and washing the car. These are regular daily and weekly tasks that, if not done, cause problems. Every family member should be expected to share the work and not expect to be paid. Except for unusual or occasional jobs that are not part of the weekly routine, parents should avoid paying children to do chores. For example, you may ask your kids if they want to earn a few extra bucks painting the house. Suppose you usually wash your car at a car wash and your daughter wants to wash it to earn a few dollars. Should you pay her? Of course you should, however on the other hand, if you expect her to wash the dishes three times a week as part of her family responsibilities, you shouldn't pay her.

Even though you may not pay your children for doing chores, don't overlook or fail to appreciate their efforts. Letting them know how helpful they have been and how well they have completed a Task boosts their self-esteem and builds their self-confidence. More importantly, they will feel that they are valued members of the family.

Source: Tim Jahn, Human Development Specialist, at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

