

Chores & Other Necessary Things

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"Work is the inevitable condition of human life, the true source of welfare." - Leo Tolstoy.

Human life is beset with a number of unpleasant features. One of these features is the heavy maintenance requirement. Think about it - we're not like deer in the woods or monkeys in the jungle. They eat, scrounge, make a mess, and relieve themselves without worry. They simply move on to another patch of woods. We humans, on the other hand, live around the regular messes we make. Therefore, high on the list of survival skills (and skills to attract and keep a mate) is routine cleaning, food preparation, and waste removal. Close behind, of course, the repair and rehabilitative arts (a.k.a. fixin' things).

In order to continue life as we know it (and do it within a community), we must repeatedly complete a host of chores. A person must conquer the almost overwhelming temptation to sit and eat. Or how about the trap of doing something really fun? If you somehow make your way past these vile enticements, you then face the equally intense voice in your head which says if you wait long enough, someone else will complete the task for you. For most of us adults, we've muddled our way through these inducements, and we have *some* measure of upkeep. But children are not born with an overwhelming sense of urgency to pick up their rooms. Torn within this quiet but raging internal battle? The modern child.

Teaching your child how to clean up after him or herself and contribute to the life of the family is on our list of parental duties. That's because if we as parents don't do it, their future spouse will have to - and that never works very well. They'll need all their energy to devote to relationship skills and working out how to live together. Nothing puts a damper on emotional closeness like having to do the parenting that your spouse's parents should have done.

So there it is parents; right there on your list. Teach your kids how to do chores. Now by chores, I mean age appropriate and time-limited maintenance tasks. I don't mean slave labor or a full-time job. We're simply talking routine helping as a participating member of the family. You'd be surprised (or maybe you wouldn't) how many parents tell me they simply can't get little Johnny to do anything around the house. It isn't about *asking*; it's about *telling*.

Having children learn to do regular chores is a part of what one person called "basic German Shepherd." That is, learning how to take basic requests/commands like "come, sit, stay, go, pick up your Reeboks." These are the fundamental building blocks of civilization; doing what you are asked to do. And yet some parents haven't taught this to their children. The weird thing is that they are trying to get their child to do more complicated things, such as algebra or creative writing, when they are helpless to get the little darling to help out around the house. If you can't

get them to do a few chores, then higher mathematics may need to wait.

A chore list posted on the refrigerator can help. Each chore name goes down the left side in a column and across the page goes the seven days of the week. Each child's name is put in the appropriate boxes so everyone knows what they need to do. Then rotate tasks every week or month just to reduce boredom and to help everyone learn a variety of jobs.

I recommend giving children an allowance each week as a participating member of the family, just as my wife and I receive spending money each week. This helps in a number of ways. First, the child's role in the family is acknowledged and appreciated with a token of value. Second, the money allows them to learn and practice money management. Third, the income allows you to make deductions for certain problems that arise. For instance, if someone's job is to feed the dogs and, even after a reminder, they fail to do it, the parent may do it for a fee. This fee is obviously deducted from the child's allowance. Of course, you could use a consequence unrelated to money, such as helping someone in another chore. The new chore should take more time and effort than the original one in order to constitute some degree of penalty. Another good use of their money is charging 50 cents or \$1 when they holler insults to their sibling, which they have clearly been told not to do. The money can be given to the offended party, along with the apology. Children will soon realize they would rather hold onto their money than hurl insults.

Learning how to manage money is, as we said, another benefit to giving allowances. The model of parenting I present in this column expects and even desires mistakes at the earlier level of childhood behavior. We can see mistakes as one of THE major ways we learn in life, and we want our children to make "money mistakes" when it's a \$5.00 problem instead of an \$80,000 mortgage later on.

Children can also learn to feel pleasure in a job completed by doing chores. Maintenance tasks are especially hard to feel successful in because they repeat themselves in an endless loop. Doing the laundry or mowing the lawn has a very short life of accomplishment and satisfaction. Within a few days, it needs doing again. However, we must learn to emotionally celebrate each time we finish a task if we are going to maximize our likelihood of doing it in the future. This is also true if we want any quality to our lives. We must develop the *intrinsic* satisfaction, since the actual task has little or none inherently. This is what the Bible teaches when it says we should be working as unto the Lord. Whatever the task, however boring or difficult, it can be seen in a different light when looking at its success from various angles.

Chores are also a way to work together as a family or in groups of two or three. This helps the family's group identity and bonding, as well as puts the family in situations to experience and discover each other in deeper ways. One of the things they know in Army boot camp is that bonds are strengthened when people go through hard times together. Think of chores as a cherished bonding experience for the family...and it's free!

So assess your children to see what marks they are earning in the subject of life skills: pick up

and maintenance. Keep it simple and make it an expected part of family life. Allow your children to share in the rewards of being a family member. Be sure your teaching extends to the area of chores. If you don't do it, you might expect a rather unpleasant call from your future son or daughter-in-law.

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