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Teaching a Work Ethic

By [Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed.D.](#) ~ 5 min read

It's a familiar scene in my office. A family comes in with two or three kids. Mom, especially if she is single, complains about overwhelming exhaustion from her job and ungrateful kids. Doing double duty with work and household tasks, she does everything her non-working mom ever did, from volunteering at the kids' schools to laundry, cooking, and cleaning, plus a demanding career. She can't figure out how it is that somehow she gets less help from her kids than she remembers offering as a kid herself. Two-parent families don't fare much better. Dad says he chips in when he can but he works too and, anyway, he can't get the kids to help much either.

So I ask them what the kids are expected to do to earn their keep. Usually it's something pretty tame: clean their rooms on Saturdays; clear the table; feed the dog. But these minor chores become the major cause of stress in the household. All the reminding, nagging, pleading, threatening, and bribing that goes on to get them done makes the adults wonder if it's all worth it. Often enough, one or the other of the parents decides it's just plain easier to do the task than to engage in the battle involved in getting the kids to help. The parents resent having to do everything. The kids end up feeling so entitled that they resent being asked to even clean up after their own spills and messes.

In my practice, I've noticed that conflict about chores comes up with almost every family; the only exceptions are most of the local farm families. On the farms, the kids work and work hard. Generally, these kids feed animals, muck out stalls, help with the fields, and still do their homework and participate on sports teams. Why is it that their in-town friends can't find the time or motivation to just take out the garbage?

I think it comes down to this: On the smaller farms, work is clearly valued, it is done routinely, by everyone, and the consequences for not doing it are obvious and clear. In

other households, kids experience work as capriciously imposed by the big people and whether they do it or not has little observable consequence.

So, how do the rest of us (i.e., those of us without the handy reminder of a cow standing at the gate insisting on being milked) get our kids to pitch in?

Work Must Be Valued

First, we need to rethink our whole notion of chores. If you think they are optional, depending on what else is going on, so will your kids. If you hate daily chores and want to foist them off on the kids, the kids will resist the foisting. If you resent the amount of work you had to do as a kid and believe that it is now your turn to be exempt from household chores, you will incur the same resentment from your children that you harbor towards your own parents. If, deep down inside, you think there's been a terrible mistake and that you are supposed to have a personal servant to pick up your socks, your kids will also be looking around for someone else to do it. Our kids pick up our attitudes whether we say them or not. Consider whether you yourself need an attitude transplant before you start working on your kids.

Here's why: To teach a work ethic, parents need first to believe that doing the work required to maintain ourselves is a necessary, and even agreeable, way to spend part of every day. That mysterious and much-talked-about attribute called positive self-esteem is built on knowing how to take care of ourselves and how to do it well. Kids who are routinely excused from the daily tasks that go into maintaining a household end up "excused" from basic competencies. People generally feel good about themselves when they can accept chores gracefully as a necessary part of life, do them with skill and efficiency, and take pride in the results. People who can feel good about small things like a well-made bed don't have to wait for the once-a-season homerun to feel like a person of consequence.

Once you've got your own attitude in the right place, you can think about having a family meeting. Outline what needs to be done to maintain the household so that everyone (including parents) can have time for other activities and some relaxation. Let the kids brainstorm with you about the basic chores (food shopping, meal prep, laundry, cleaning the bathroom, yard work, etc.) that happen each day and week and who does them. They, and you, may be surprised at the level of support some people get at the expense of other people.

When you have your list of what needs to be done, you can start making changes about how it gets done.