

How Kids Benefit from Real Responsibilities

Written by Laura Grace Weldon

Friday, 01 June 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 18 January 2019 09:29

Years ago, my two older kids, about 7 and 9 at the time, were getting ready to wash the floor. A neighbor girl knocked at the door, asking to play. When my son told her he was going to wash the floor first, she begged to be included. This girl had more monetary advantages than my children could have imagined—summer camp, private skating lessons, hundreds of TV channels—but she was entranced. She'd never seen kids doing chores, let alone kids in charge of cleaning a floor. She pitched right in as they scooted furniture out of the way, then swept.



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I gave them a bucket of slightly soapy water and they went to work with rags, scooting across the wet floor on their knees like crabs, giggling as the floor got wetter and their scooting became sloshy sliding. Their method didn't matter to me. I was holding the baby and diverting the toddler while peeling potatoes and finishing up a work-related call. I was pretty sure the floor would be somewhat cleaner when they were done. They dried it with towels, moved the furniture back

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with appropriate grunting and groaning, then slumped on the couch. They looked entirely relaxed, as people do when satisfied with a job well done. When I got off the phone, I came in to thank them. They were admiring how the floor caught the light and cautioning our toddler to keep his sippy cup on the table.

After that day the neighbor girl asked if she could do chores every time she came over. It seemed funny at the time, but I think now that she recognized she'd been missing the sense of accomplishment and camaraderie found in working together.

The floors aren't spotless in my house. The bathrooms are also far from perfect. But I'm totally at peace with this. That's because my kids handle much of the cleaning around here. I'm happy to do the cooking (or, more truthfully, I have control issues about what goes into the food my family eats). And I don't mind being the family laundry wench, although I know kids are capable of handling their own laundering tasks. But in the spirit of "we're all in this together" I've expected my kids to handle a sizeable share of household (and farm) work ever since they were small. I still do.

Timing

Starting young is the key. When toddlers beg to help fold laundry or wash the car with us, it's easier to send them off to play so we can get the job done ourselves. But this is exactly the time to foster a child's natural helpfulness. It's also a powerful way to promote positive development in all sorts of areas. Research shows that children who participate in household tasks starting at age 3 or 4 are more likely to succeed in adulthood. I'm talking big success like educational completion, meeting career goals, and maintaining good relationships with family and friends. Even I.Q. scores had a weaker correlation with success than giving children early responsibilities.

And waiting until children were older can backfire. We tend to spend a lot on activities and products for our children, assuming this enriches their lives, but if they don't get the chance to take on real responsibilities, we're depriving them of key components of adult competency.

Young children clamor to be included. When a preschooler begs to help prepare dinner, he doesn't want to play with cooking toys, he wants to participate in the real work that's taking place. It slows us down to let him cut fresh mushrooms with a butter knife (and restraint to avoid

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criticizing or re-cutting), but a child recognizes his contribution toward dinner. He's also more likely to eat it.

Movement and Hands-on Experience

Helping out engages young children in activities that promote movement-cued development. This includes large motor activities like digging in the garden, carrying a watering can, putting away groceries, and sweeping with a broom. It also includes fine motor tasks like using a screwdriver and tearing lettuce for a salad.

Childhood is a period of major neuroplasticity, when learning actually changes the brain's functional anatomy. Hands-on experiences are particularly vital at this time. In fact, the child who regularly engages with manipulatives (arranging veggies on a platter, setting the table, sorting socks) and applies real-world math (measuring and pouring coffee beans in the grinder, taking things apart and putting them together, following recipes) has a strong foundation of representational experience, which enables better understanding of abstract mathematical concepts when they are introduced later. These movement-based tasks are also closely linked to the brain development necessary for reading and writing. (Find out more about this in Sally Goddard Blythe's wonderful book *The Well Balanced Child: Movement and Early Learning*.)

Growing as a Person and a Family

Children accustomed to flashy toys and rapidly changing screen images may become so wired to this overstimulation that without it they're bored. The slower pace of yard and household tasks can be an important antidote, especially when we're willing to go at a child's pace. Young children tend to balk when they're hurried or left out. They show us, stubbornly and often loudly, that there's nothing more important to them than the here and now. So whenever possible, slow down so you can make working together enjoyable. Letting a small child spread peanut butter, cut sandwiches, and pour milk into cups affirms the value of the present moment. It also makes an ordinary lunch into a tea party.

The benefits don't end for older children. Hands-on experience in all sorts of tasks and hobbies promotes learning, builds character, and helps to form the basis of our future selves. When neurologist Frank R. Wilson interviewed high achievers, he found many credited their expertise to attributes learned through hands-on activities. In his book *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*, Wilson emphasizes that resourcefulness and self-definition arise from the use of our hands more than from the dictates of our educational

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system.

In a way, doing tasks together puts parent and child on more even ground. So often we parents are rushing to schlep our kids to practice or lessons or other kid-oriented events, making them the pivot around which a family's activities revolve. Taking part in regular tasks together, even if we're pulling weeds on opposite sides of the garden, affirms the sort of mutuality that advertisers tell us is only found in pricey vacations. Of course, time afterward for a nice game of hoops and some cold lemonade builds bonds, too.

As our children grow, doing tasks together can continue to strengthen our relationships. Moments of meaningful interaction happen easily when washing dishes, folding laundry, fixing the car, or walking the dog together. Working on shared chores helps a child's contemplative side emerge, prompting discussions that may never have happened otherwise. This is true between parent and child as well as between siblings. I remember my mother bemoaning the arrival of our dishwasher because we no longer took turns washing and drying, putting an end to a relaxed half hour of post-dinner conversation each evening.

It's easy to make these activities a tradition. Teenagers who have always helped out when a parent puts on snow tires, cleans out the basement for a yearly garage sale, or cans pickles may grumble when asked, but chances are they'd feel excluded if left out. In part, who we are is defined by what we do. Growing up with hands-on lessons in taking initiative, practicing cooperation, and working toward a goal helps to shape character. And it transforms pickle-making from drudgery to an important family ritual.

Delayed Gratification

This is a biggie in the "you'll thank me later" department, because kids who are able to delay gratification are much more likely to do well as they grow up.

We model delayed gratification each time we choose to work for a later or larger goal. This includes saving, making do, and making something ourselves. We demonstrate it when the whole family pitches in to rake a neighbor's leaves while she's recovering from a broken hip. We teach it when we let a child see that if he doesn't do the laundry when it's his turn, there won't be a clean team shirt to wear to the game. And we show that it's expected every time our kids pitch in with the ordinary jobs necessary to run a household.

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This may seem negative, particularly when popular culture constantly screams “have it now” and “get what you want.” But there are enormous positives. Our children become familiar with the pleasures of anticipation, which multiplies the eventual delight when a goal is reached. They also begin to internalize the ability to delay gratification.

This is pivotal for success. Multiple studies (cited in Daniel Goleman’s book Emotional Intelligence) found that children who were able to defer gratification grew into teens and young adults who were more socially competent, better able to deal with frustration, more dependable, reached higher educational attainments, and were effectively able to make and reach long-term goals. Delayed gratification is also related to impulse control. Research shows that a child’s ability to control his or her impulses at an early age is predictive of success even decades later as a healthy, financially stable, and positive member of the community.

Expecting children and teens to take an active part in running a household gives them plenty of opportunity to gain the positive coping skills that help them control their impulses and delay gratification. It may seem like returning to the old adage “Work first, play later,” but the benefits can be extraordinary.

Skill Building

Regular tasks allow our children to see for themselves how the world works. They grasp principles of science and math as a seed becomes a tree, as boards are transformed into bookshelves, as flour and yeast turn into bread. They develop traits such as patience. They are motivated to apply what they’re learning to more challenging endeavors of their own. Sure, it doesn’t hurt to know what it takes to grow the tomatoes, make the sauce, and prepare the beans for tonight’s enchiladas. But more important, as our children become proficient at the jobs necessary to sustain their families, they also see themselves as capable. That perception transfers across all endeavors.

There’s no denying that children who participate pick up useful skills. They see that maintenance is easier than waiting till the car or laptop breaks. They can set the table, toss a salad, make a sandwich, and boil pasta. Not right away, but eventually. While they are making real contributions to running the household they’re actively learning how to cook, launder, clean, make repairs, maintain a vehicle, budget expenses, and handle other tasks that are essential for an independent life once they’re adults. Wonderful lessons in cause and effect are reinforced when children complete work and benefit from the results. Seeing oneself as an agent of useful change? Priceless.

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They also learn from the examples we show them, such as how to handle pressure and ways to learn from mistakes. Whether we're 4 or 40, gaining competency feels good. It doesn't hurt to give credit where it's due. So if your child has been busy chopping mangoes, strawberries, and pineapple into tasty chunks, try renaming the result "Sophie's Special Fruit Salad" for extra reinforcement.

Purpose

When we stack firewood to prepare for the upcoming winter, make a gift to celebrate a friend's good news, or change a favorite recipe to accommodate Grandpa's diabetes, our efforts have purpose and value. As our children participate along with us, they feel the intrinsic satisfaction of doing something that has meaning.

So many educational tasks put before our children serve no purpose other than to instruct. But when learning is connected to something truly purposeful, it can't help but kindle motivation.

Children feel honored to be included in real work that includes real challenges. If we pay attention, we see that's just what they pretend to do when they play.

Beyond Chores

I'm not fond of the word "chores." It implies that kids and adults have tasks that are set apart from the rest of our lives. Making work around the house and yard a regular part of our lives together seems more natural.

I think it's valuable to get work done together as much as possible. For me, the simplest way to respond to grumbling has always been, "That's just how we do it in our family," without engaging in arguments on the topic. Of course, balance is essential. Children and teens—well, all of us—need time to daydream, play, socialize, relax, work on projects, and experience all of life's other joys.

My kids have their own chores, which they sometimes rotate. They haven't always done them well or on time, by any means. Accepting a floor as clean as a child will get it is part of having

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children participate. And I'm pretty laid back about things like clean bedrooms. (I remind them we try to adhere to the Firefighter Rule: Could emergency workers navigate a bedroom if necessary?) I understand that kids put less energy into tasks that don't seem to have much importance. They recognize that a clean bedroom doesn't affect our family's functioning, while they know for sure that cutting and stacking firewood will keep our house warm. Hence, the firewood is done right while their rooms are often just short of scandalous.

We've never given them an allowance, mostly because we haven't been able to afford it. Families have counted on children throughout history for work that was reliable and essential. Today we are fortunate that we don't have to rely on our kids to survive, but we can expect them to contribute. The tasks may not be fun or interesting, but they are necessary. They demonstrate to every child that he or she is a valuable contributor to the well-being of the family. And hearing, "Thanks, we couldn't have done it without you," feels good too.

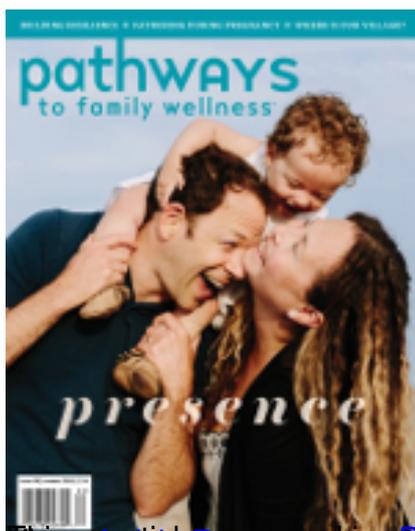
I'm pretty sure growing up this way has contributed to how super-responsible my kids are now in their teen and young adult years. They see a pile of boxes I need to load for our food co-op and carry them, never waiting for me to ask. They gladly stop whatever they're doing to pitch in for an hour or all day when help is needed in the garage or barn or backyard. They are incredibly capable people who are far more astute and skilled than I'll ever be. They can milk cows, fix tractors and cars, cut and bale hay, install plumbing, make meals, diagnose a sick chicken, hang drywall, identify spiders, back up their political opinions, weld, put on a roof—well, you get the idea. Sure, they have busy social lives and enjoy keeping their faces aimed at screens just like everyone else. But they recently spent an entire weekend helping a family member pack, move, and make repairs. They worked hard and displayed nothing but their usual good cheer. After exhausting 14-hour days I asked if they'd rather have skipped this particular task. Every one of them affirmed that it was no big deal. And I heard my words come back to me: "It's just the way we do things in our family."

Portions of this article were excerpted from Free Range Learning.

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