

HOW TO GET YOUNG CHILDREN DOING CHORES

Getting your young children involved with household tasks can be the perfect opportunity to boost their feelings of competence and self-esteem. It also gives them a helping role in the family. Children feel good about themselves when they feel needed. Giving your children the responsibility for small but meaningful chores will send them the message that you're confident in their ability to handle responsibility and follow through with a task. If the results are somewhat messy or undesirable at first, it can be tempting to simply take over the job yourself. Make an effort to avoid that temptation - eventually your patience and gentle guidance will pay off.

The following tips focus on getting children interested and involved in helping out around the house:

- Don't underestimate your smallest helpers. Filling up a basket with small toys, helping to put wet clothes into the dryer, matching clean socks for folding or putting out placemats on the table are all tasks a toddler can do. When young children become accustomed to helping out, it will be much easier to introduce more complex tasks when they are older.
- Have some fun. Most young children enjoy being given "jobs" - so embrace their enthusiasm and encourage their interest in helping out. Let your child know that you enjoy working with her and appreciate her efforts. Sing a silly folding song, create a dusting dance or initiate a bed-making race. Child-sized brooms, shovels, gardening gloves and shovels are greatly enjoyed and will also reduce the frustration that can arise when an adult-sized tool is too unwieldy for small hands.
- Avoid offering financial compensation for housework. Try to send the message that all members of the family are expected to help keep the household running smoothly. If you set a payment precedent, you'll be forced to offer financial rewards for all future tasks. Reserve financial rewards for extra-tough jobs like cleaning out the tool shed or painting the garage.
- Put together a "clean team." Children will enjoy working on a task when they have a partner or two. Work alongside your child and encourage siblings to tackle chores together.
- Keep it simple. Keep the task manageable, without too many steps or parts to it. Take notice of your child's efforts, even if the results are not perfect. Remember that it will probably take several attempts before your five year old is able to make his bed properly. Give him some time and offer encouragement as he learns to master the task. Resist the temptation to "fix" his work - you'll only discourage future efforts.
- Be consistent. Pick one or two manageable tasks and stick with those for a while. Make it clear that you expect the job to be done within a specific time frame. Establish logical consequences when tasks are not completed in a timely manner. Introduce additional responsibilities only when the original tasks have been mastered. Avoid overload - if your child feels overwhelmed by the added responsibility, it's likely that the tasks will be ignored or abandoned.

Choose age appropriate chores. The following list includes some possibilities:

- Two and three year-olds
- Fill baskets or small boxes with toys
- Put clothing in laundry basket.
- Put shoes in closet.
- Scoop out dog or cat food and fill bowls.

Four year olds

- Dress self - pants, skirts, T-shirts, sweaters.
- Carry in the newspaper or mail.
- Put silverware and napkins on table.
- Sort laundry, put wet clothes in dryer, fold small towels or washcloths.
- Decorate thank you notes or shopping list.

Five year olds

- Answer the telephone.
- Pour juice or milk - using a child-size pitcher.
- Make the bed.
- Put on socks and shoes. Close Velcro fasteners or simple buckles.

Six year olds

- Make a simple sandwich. Gather snacks and drink box for lunch box.
- Carry dishes to the kitchen counter or sink.
- Sweep or use a hand-held mini-vacuum or carpet sweeper.
- Straighten up bedroom.
- Put away laundry.

Seven to nine year olds

- Load dirty dishes into dishwasher. Unload and put away clean dishes.
- Shovel light snow.
- Rake leaves.
- Set and clear table.

Ten to twelve year olds

- Arrange play dates.
- Take telephone messages.
- Assist with cooking.
- Vacuum bedroom.
- Change sheets.

SOME TOY STORAGE AND CLEAN-UP STRATEGIES

Toys seem to take on a life of their own and multiply to fill up any empty space in the house. It is a challenge to keep them where they belong, and to encourage your children to pick them up. Here are some tips for getting - and keeping - your child's toy collection under control.

- Choose child-friendly storage options. Easily accessible shelves and lightweight, lidless containers are among the best storage options. These provide safe and easy access to toys.
- When your child can see and reach containers, she's more likely to play with the toys and put them away properly. Simple picture labels on bins and shelves will also encourage independent clean-up.
- If you choose shelves, be sure that they are anchored securely to the wall and are low enough to accommodate your child's limited reach.
- Avoid using traditional toy chests for toy storage - these can pinch, bruise or break children's fingers if the lid closes suddenly. They also pose a suffocation threat if the child climbs in and is trapped inside. It's best to avoid using a traditional toy chest entirely, but if you must use one, be sure there are several ventilation holes in the sides and bottom of the chest to prevent suffocation and a lid that locks into place.
- Pick and choose toys with care. When your children receive toys as gifts for holidays and birthdays, take a careful look. If the toy is a duplicate, seems inappropriate for your child's age or appears unsafe, stop and assess your options. Duplicates can be donated to a local charity or school, or they can be recycled as birthday gifts for your child's friends. Toys that seem "too old" can be stored away for later use. Unsafe toys should be tossed in the trash can immediately.
- Create a rainy day box. Gather together a mini-collection of toys and organize them into a few "rainy day" boxes. Store these away from the main toy collection and introduce them when the next rainy day arrives.
- Reduce, reuse, recycle. Make a conscious effort to set some limits on toy purchases. Perhaps your children will receive new toys only on birthdays and holidays. Don't underestimate the appeal of toys "handed-down" from older siblings and relatives. Just be sure they are clean and safe.
- Set up a toy recycling program with cousins, neighbors and friends. Rotate a few select toys - wooden blocks, ride-on toys, balls, jump-ropes, etc.- among the group on a monthly basis.
- Encourage toy philanthropy. Choose a favorite local organization - a Head Start program, daycare center, homeless shelter, or health clinic - and donate toys on a regular basis. Introduce the ideas to children as part of their birthday celebration or holiday gift-giving. When your children receive new toys as gifts for birthdays or holidays, have them choose at least one toy to donate to the chosen charity. Include children in the clean-up and delivery of the donation.

- Set up a regular clean-up schedule. Initiate a daily cleaning binge. Set the kitchen timer for ten minutes and join your children in a race against the clock. Set a large chunk of time once a week for more thorough cleaning.
- Even very young children can participate in toy clean-up. Establish the rule that the previous game or project must be cleaned up before the next can be started.

HOW OLD IS OLD ENOUGH TO STAY HOME ALONE?

- Unfortunately, there is no magic number. Some children are ready to stay home alone for a brief time at 10, while others aren't capable at 12. Judge by your individual child's behavior, not an age or grade. Parents who are considering leaving a child at home alone should look for signs of maturity:
- Is your child truly aware of safety issues such as what to do in case of fire and how to make a 911 call? Can s/he explain safety precautions in her/his own words? It's not enough for the child to repeat the rules - s/he must have a full understanding to be able to implement them.
- Does your child show good judgment? Consider your past experiences with this child. Are his choices well-intentioned or well-thought-out? When a child is home alone, good intentions don't count.
- Is your child comfortable being alone? A child who won't stay upstairs by himself probably won't do well home alone.
- Once you've decided to let your child stay home alone, it's a good idea to practice handling problem situations.
- For example, ask the child: What will you do if you feel lonely or scared? What if someone comes to the door? What if the phone rings? What do you do in an emergency or electrical storm or power outage?
- Try a few home-alone dry runs. Let your child practice with a parent who is in the house, but unavailable.
- Next, try leaving him alone while you go on a short neighborhood trip and work up to longer excursions.
- Develop a comprehensive set of rules for home-alone children together, covering everything from visiting friends to eating. Post them prominently.
- Finally, after your child has successfully stayed home alone, make a point of praising and congratulating him for achieving such an important milestone.