

CHORE WARS

Getting the kids to lend a hand

WRITTEN BY JAN WILSON

There's plenty of work involved in keeping the family running, from laundry to cleaning to picking up and taking out the garbage. Seems like there is more than enough to go around. And yet, the bulk of the chores often land on the same shoulders (and often those shoulders belong to mom).

But hey, kids have a lot to learn, and getting them started with household work is a good way to teach some important lessons about competence, responsibility and independence. Plus, additional hands lighten the load for all family members.

Following is a primer of jobs that can be delegated to little hands. ♦



PRESCHOOLERS

This stage comes with the added dimension of using chores to build character, in addition to the skill required to do the chore. Audrey Bommer, a Leonia banker and mother of a 5-year-old, believes that teaching responsibility "whether social or financial is very critical and needs to start at any early age." She says her son has to make his bed in the morning, clear his dishes after a meal, and understand that he is on a budget and what things cost.

"If he wants a pricey toy," Bommer says, "we talk about it. And if he gets some new things, we might give something away to people who are less fortunate."

Bommer says that when she was growing up, her family always maintained a chore list, and that when it comes to the family members working together in a household, "It's a partnership. It's not my responsibility to keep the house clean, it's our responsibility."

Children at this age can also start managing bigger tasks like taking out the garbage, wiping down counters, sorting laundry and doing some outdoor chores like raking leaves (with proper supervision).

TODDLERS

Chores can start when your little one is a toddler and she wants to become "Mommy's Little Helper." Now is the time when you can "make it a game," says Dr. Frank Sileo, psychologist and the executive director of the Center for Psychological Enhancement in Ridgewood.

"The important thing for toddlers," he says, "is that you 'show, not tell' and that you model the behavior that you expect."

Keep it simple and make the chores something a small child can execute easily. At this age, self-care activities such as brushing teeth and getting dressed can be considered chores, as well as picking up and sorting toys into bins. Sileo says that with parental help, 2- and 3-year-olds can also water plants and feed pets.

The key to getting children to do their chores at this age is to keep it entertaining. Sileo says, for example, that

parents can "put on a song and see if your child can clean up all the toys before the song ends." He also says that, as in all things, consistency is important for children in this age group.

"Having them do some kind of chore every day and showering them with praise when they do it will make it a routine that's easy to maintain," he says.





ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

Having three kids means three times the clutter, but as the saying goes, "many hands make light work." Kristen Kajiwara, of Leonia, a stay-at-home mom with 11- and 7-year-old sons and a 5-year-old daughter, says their contribution to housework is significant.

"We feel like everyone should be pitching in for the family," she says. "I don't want to be a servant or maid."

Her two older children are paid a nominal allowance for "being at my beck and call," Kajiwara says with a laugh, but not for regular chores (which include helping to clean bathrooms, dusting, and maintaining their own bedrooms and playroom).

"Chores make them take responsibility for their things, so they take better care of them," she says. "They never come to me saying they can't find this or that."

She adds that she has a good recipe for making sure kids don't ignore their responsibilities. "If a room gets too untidy, I start tossing their stuff in the garbage," she says. "You follow through one time, and they know what mom is going to do!"

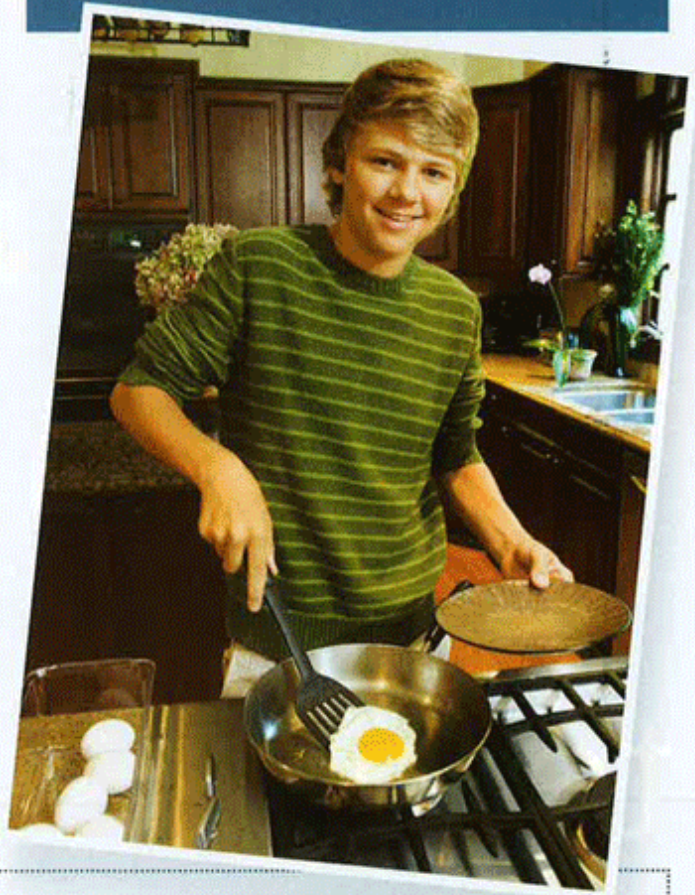
Children at this age can also start loading and emptying the dishwasher, setting and clearing the table and vacuuming. Middle school children can also help maintain grocery lists and help with shopping at the store, help run simple errands and help with outdoor chores like snow shoveling.

HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Dr. Kevin Brennan, a licensed clinical psychologist in Glen Rock, says the chores that high school and college students can progressively learn to do "will be excellent life skills and should be seen as learning opportunities for their adulthood. Children at this age can start to do complex things like grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning (deep cleaning, not just picking up), organizing, laundry and taking on projects like clearing out the attic, painting a fence, even basic tool skills. All of these chores should be presented and taught more like apprenticeships and should be set right at the level of their individual proficiency."

Brennan, who once worked as a college counselor, says the biggest intensifier of homesickness at school was not knowing how to do some basic life skills like laundry, cooking, scheduling, shopping and household cleaning. That's why, he says, it is important that kids learn those skills from you. At this age, you might want to allow your child to pick from a list of chores, as long as they know it's a privilege to do so, Brennan says.

"Picking the chores is both a privilege and a skill," he says. "so children should do it if they have earned it and they show they are capable of negotiating chores well."



RESISTANT TEENS

Teens push back on many things, and chores are no exception. Here are some tips from Dr. Kevin Brennan to minimize fighting.

1. Make a list for each child that shows a basic level of responsibility expected from them (do your chores, behave well, do well at school, etc.) and a list of all the privileges they earn by doing so (pretty much everything you already give them).
2. Make sure they know the consequence for not meeting expectations is that ALL privileges are denied.
3. Have them sign the list, like a contract, and hang it for easy reference.
4. Have weekly meetings assigning chores: some easy, some normal, some harder skill levels.

Promote hard chores (cooking, laundry, larger projects, shopping) as life-skill classes that you can teach them. Mastering those skills and taking them on as responsibilities can earn higher-level privileges (use of the car, later curfews, more adult choices, less supervision).