

Want to teach your kids to be better people? Make them do chores

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Julie Lythcott-Haims has seen the worst consequences of helicopter parenting as a former dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising at Stanford University. Her new book, *How to Raise an Adult*, charts a way to stop the hand-holding and help kids become independent, flourishing adults. And if we're going to teach kids life skills, we should start by giving them chores, Lythcott-Haims says.

A poll conducted in the U.S. last year showed that 82 per cent of parents said they grew up with chores, but only 28 per cent made their own kids do them. Why is that?

Certainly, in communities of affluence, we're often hiring someone else to clean our home or cut our lawn. The notion of hiring somebody to do work for you is a factor, which means kids in those homes aren't asked to do those same jobs and chores. But, I think there's also in many communities this hyper-scheduled childhood, which is not only the right schools, [but] the right classes, often entailing tremendous amounts of homework and activities. We've allowed those things to crowd out the important other skills and mindsets they've got to develop as part of childhood; namely, being responsible for one's self and contributing to the environment in which you're working or living. We've lost sight of the importance of chores.

What is the importance of chores?

Humans need to know how to apply their effort to outcomes. That's how you develop self-efficacy, by actually doing the work of life. There's a psychological harm that comes, not to mention a lack of work ethic and tremendous sense of entitlement [from not doing this work]. We are essentially preparing [children] to just be hapless, helpless sorts out in the world where people won't be nearly as accommodating as their parents.

Do too many parents give up on trying to make their kids do chores because they get tired of nagging and complaining?

Absolutely. I know I have fallen into that trap. When my kids were quite young, my husband and I did a lot of just being enchanted by their existence. When they were 8 and 10, I came home for dinner one day and realized I was still cutting their meat.

What did you do after that “aha” moment?

My husband and I had a heart to heart. We realized we’re asking so little of them, and now they’re very dependent on us – what do we do? We began implementing an expectation around chores: things like taking out the garbage and recycling, doing their own laundry, setting and clearing the table, doing the dishes.

Did they put up much resistance?

Their first question was: “If this is so important why have we not been doing it up until now?” We had to admit – not apologize, but admit – that we’d gotten it wrong. We said: “You’re right. We should have been doing it all along. Now it’s time. You need to learn these things in order to be on your own one day.”

You go over several styles of parenting in the book. What type of parent do you need to be to enforce chores?

Authoritative parents sit at this wonderful sweet spot, being responsive to their kids’ needs and to their existence but also highly demanding. When we can’t bring ourselves to tell our kids, “You need to do this, take care of that,” then we end up in this permissive, indulgent parenting style with all kinds of responsiveness to our kids, but not setting out any demands or expectations. That just creates an entitled human.

Kids may balk at first, but don’t you think they enjoy taking on tasks and the responsibility of chores?

They develop fairly quickly a sense of how good it feels to accomplish a task and to do it well. Psychologists say it

contributes to a sense of our capability and our capacity and this important concept of self-efficacy.

I was embarrassed when I read the list of age-appropriate chores in the book. I realized my kids are capable of more than I give them credit for.

Yes, they are. Our kids are stripped of the opportunity to really develop the capacity and work ethic that kids in different cultures develop because they have to contribute to the household.

We might think our affluence means our kids don’t have to work that hard, but what we’ve lost sight of is, humans must do the work of life to feel, existentially, that we are accomplishing things.

If forced to choose between chores and piano lessons, or whatever the next scheduled event is, do you think parents will choose chores?

I would put chores in the category of as essential as sleep. These are essential building blocks, components, to our children's mental health and ability to exist, survive and thrive.

This interview has been edited and condensed.