

## Why I (gently) prod my kids to do chores

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Toy cars and trucks are scattered across the floor in my son's room. On any given day there is probably a plastic sword there, too. He won't put them away in his toy box unless he's prodded. But that's okay. He's three years old. He needs to be prodded to do most things.

My daughter's room can look like an episode of *Hoarders* in the morning, if hoarders were into Shopkins, but by the afternoon it looks like someone from the military has moved in: dolls lined up in perfect rows on the windowsill, books stacked on desk just so, bed made.

My wife and I enforce certain things strictly. Other standards are good in theory but haphazardly applied. The kids need to ask to be excused from the table and they clear their plates after meals. They should put their toys away when playtime is over. They should keep their rooms clean. They need to maintain a certain level of order.

Sometimes, my son will come into the house, throw his coat on the floor and jump up on the couch. These moments require patience. I bring him back over, remind him that we hang our coats up, get him to do it and pat him on the head. Sometimes, there is yelling: "Hey, I'm not your butler!"

However strict we may be about some chores, it's not as if we're hovering over our children with a clipboard. So much of parenting today seems driven by the goal of creating a solid résumé, whether it's hiring math tutors to push that A to an A-plus or shuttling kids from karate to piano lessons. Personally, I'm not interested in raising good employees. I want to raise good people (my working theory being that a good person will always make a good employee, while I've known plenty of good employees who are complete messes as individuals).

What, to me, is a good person? Someone who knows that the care she shows to herself and others is, like virtue, its own reward. Someone with a solid work ethic. Someone who won't cower when it is time to stand up for himself and his values. Someone who can make her way in this world without needing to hold my hand, or anyone else's.

Chores are the training ground for just about all of these qualities, according to research. They teach children mastery, responsibility, empathy and self-reliance – all the qualities our helicoptering culture claims to want for our children, even though many parents won't let their kids do things on their own.

Which is perhaps why the subject of chores is so fraught now. One recent headline referred to the “chores wars,” while another from last year asked, in a perfect example of what helicopter parenting has wrought: “Should busy, stressed-out kids have to do chores?”

Yes, is the answer. (Also, if your kids' lives are so busy that they feel stressed out, stop making their lives so busy.)

I'll be the first to admit to taking the easy route too often. I'll let my kids go watch TV even though their rooms are a mess, or take them to the park when the living room looks like a marauding horde of toddlers just rampaged their way through it (it's called Saturday afternoon). I also know from lists of age-appropriate chores that my kids are capable of more than I give them credit for. My son can put his clothes in the hamper; I shouldn't be doing that for him. My daughter could wash dishes if I asked her to. I'm working on it.

Many experts suggest taking a very detailed approach in which chore charts are drawn up with specific tasks to be accomplished by specific people by specific dates. Often these charts are colour-coded. Frankly, I would rather drink mop water than enforce one of these charts on a regular basis. I'm not my kids' middle manager; I'm their father. I want them to develop the habit of keeping the house tidy because they intrinsically feel that cleanliness and order are better than mess, not because some taskmaster chart tells them so. Of course, many experts say that taskmaster approach applied rigorously is what teaches kids good habits. Plus, little kids do love ticking off boxes. But monitoring any system that formal irks me.

Instead, I've chosen a slower process that requires more patience and much more talking to my children about why certain things are important. But I believe it will be better for them, and for me, in the long run.

Of course, I've got it easy right now – easier, anyway. My kids are young enough that when I say, “Let's all play tidy-up time!” they can be coaxed into treating it like an actual game. And they are mostly compliant, although when I lose my patience and start barking orders it almost always results in whining and yelling. These minor conflicts are only a taste of what's to come. The whining of a six-year-old is nothing compared with the petulance of a tween, I'm sure.