

The great, untapped household labour pool: your kids

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My 12-year-old son has started doing his laundry. Well, more accurately, his grandmother declared it was time he learned. When she and my father were visiting recently, she decided to right past wrongs. One night, two new laundry hampers appeared, tucked under their beds, marked with their initials. (My younger son, who is 8, is now in training.) It's still early, but the dirty clothes are finding their way into the washing machine and back into the closet, not exactly folded but clean. It is, quite frankly, the best gift my mom ever gave me.

And then I talked to Chantal Hubert, a public servant who lives outside the town of Almonte, Ont. She told me that, most nights, she and her husband arrive home to an empty dishwasher, swept floor, clean kitchen and folded laundry – all completed by their four children, with no adult supervision.

Now this I had to see.

For weeks I had been interviewing families grumbling about their chore wars, which mostly centred on skirmishes between spouses. In many homes, the kids were reservists at best, and AWOL more often than not. Asking about efforts to put them to work, often prompted a weary response; exhausted in the evening, and with too few hours before bedtime as it was, what parent really wants to nag their homework-burdened children about emptying the dishwasher?

Alanna Levine, a New York-based pediatrician and author of *Raising a Self-Reliant Child: A Back-to-Basics Parenting Plan from Birth to Age 6*, is sympathetic. “We are all rushing through life,” she says. “It’s a lot easier to walk into my son’s room and pick up the things he’s thrown on the floor, than to call him upstairs and get him to put the clothes in the laundry himself.” But it is worth pondering, she suggests, the alarming numbers of 20-somethings still getting their laundry done by good ol’ Mom.

In all the stress over cooking and cleaning, an untapped labour source is not being used to its full potential: the kids who make most of the mess. U.S. anthropologist Elinor Ochs, the co-editor of the new book *Fast-Forward Family*, says the “helplessness” of children in many North

American homes stands in contrast to other countries, such as Sweden, where children are taught to be fairly self-reliant by age seven and the culture views chores as a family activity that teaches social responsibility – rather than a monetary exchange of allowance.

In Canada, according to 2005 statistics, the most recent year for which numbers are available, 61 per cent of teenagers report doing no daily chores. Among those who were pitching in, the amount of time they spend on those tasks had fallen slightly: 23 minutes a day from 28. They were mostly spending that time on preparing meals and cleaning. The responses on laundry were too low to produce a statistic. On a positive note, the gender chores gap for teenagers with Canadian-born parents had virtually disappeared by then; boys and girls were both equally likely to participate in the daily chores, and to land kitchen duty. (In immigrant families, girls still did more chores.)

And when exactly are the chores supposed to happen? There's hardly time to get the math questions finished between all the enriching extra-curricular activities. If they were around, maybe they could wash the dishes, but only about one-third of Canadian teens report eating dinner with their parents on an average day. For girls especially, the time spent on homework and paid jobs has increased.

With everyone feeling the pinch, perhaps it's time for more drastic measures to get kids to help out. Calgary parenting coach Jessica Stilwell made international headlines last fall, when she went on a cleaning strike for a week: refusing to pick up after her three daughters, even sending them to school with their sandwiches in poop-and-scoop bags when they failed to clean out their lunch boxes. Did it work? In an interview last month, she reported that life is better, but not perfect. "I am proud to say the lunch bags and agendas are on the counter every night. The threat of a doggy doo-doo bag is more than a Grade 7 can handle."

She also learned, though, how much she was doing "on autopilot," and how too-high standards are counterproductive. "Another lesson for me is not to undermine the job my children have already done by going behind and fixing it for them."

Teaching the household labour pool early also helps the lessons stick. A 2002 American study suggested that doing chores at home was a stronger predictor of success – if they started young. (Dumping chores on a 15-or 16-year-old for the first time didn't have the same positive influence.) "Start early," says Levine. "Then it becomes part of a family activity, and not, 'Mom's making me clear the table.'"

On a Wednesday night, I showed up at the Huberts' hobby farm just as the eldest daughters, Kristyn, 16, and Erin, 15, arrived home. They cleaned the kitchen until the counters sparkled. Even if they were putting it on for guests, they were definitely efficient. When Alex, 10, got home, he folded the laundry; Meghan, 12, was assigned to load the dishwasher after dinner.

Their mom conceded it doesn't always work so smoothly. And the kids reveal that trades are often made – Erin, in particular, barter chocolates bars for chores so she can nap after school. It also becomes clear that living out in the country has advantages: no chores, no drive. "Mom drives us everywhere," says Erin, before turning to her mother, who is working at the kitchen

table. “By the way, tomorrow I have soccer practice at 6:30 a.m.” Kristyn also explains that her parents pay the cell phone bills. Plus, “Mom won’t cook dinner if the kitchen is dirty.”

Hubert’s secret weapon is on the fridge: a detailed flow chart complete with red arrows to identify each chore, who does it, and in what order. For a decade, while a stay-at-home mom, she says, “I did everything for my children. It was to the detriment of me.” But back at work, and commuting up to an hour each way, Hubert finally decided that the chore load needed an adjustment. “I was angry constantly. And yelling at the kids. And that’s not fun for anyone.”

So she learned to be strategic, dividing the tasks into small, manageable stages. “Everybody is working as a team. I have the chores designed so that if you don’t do your portion someone else can’t do their portion.” The laundry is loaded by Kristyn in the morning, tossed in the dryer by Erin in the afternoon, and folded by Alex when he gets home. Each of the kids has a larger chore once a week.

If the system collapses, family meetings are called, but on this afternoon, her older girls admit that their mom may be doing them a favour. “One of my friends doesn’t know how to work an oven or a dishwasher,” says Erin. “What are they supposed to do when they get older?”

At my house, reform is under way. The flow chart is a work in progress. My husband has already trained the kids to unload the groceries with military precision. And this summer, my father, a retired army officer, has promised to teach my eldest how to iron. That’s the kind of outsourcing not even money can buy.

How to start them young

Start chores young; here’s what your preschooler can accomplish. How does your teenager compare?

Two-year-olds: Pick up toys and put them on a shelf or in a toy chest, put dirty clothes into the hamper and trash into the wastebasket, help sort laundry into lights and darks.

Three-year-olds: Water plants or feed pets, clean up her own spills, help clear the table, serve herself breakfast or a simple snack, put her clean, folded clothes in dresser drawers.

Four-year-olds: Set the table, take forks and spoons out of the dishwasher, dust, help with simple cooking tasks.

Five- and six-year-olds: Make their beds, empty small wastebaskets, pack their own backpack, help sort recycling items.