

Are Your Children Pulling Their Weight?

by Bonnie Harris

It seems that it is getting harder and harder to expect children to do household chores. Or is it that it's harder for parents to see that their children do them? Either way, too many children are learning that "I don't have to" about most anything they don't want to do.

Some children are easy. Ask them to do something, and they do it. I had one of those children. Then there are some who dig in their heels and refuse to do what they don't want to do—they are fearsome to recon with. I had one of those too. But the fearsome ones, who fill us with dread at the thought of the next meltdown, exhausting us before the day has much begun, aren't saying they don't want to cooperate. They're just saying, "Don't tell me what to do."

It is important for the development of self-discipline and self-confidence to help the family unit work-to feel like an important member. When they don't have to help, they learn that they shouldn't be expected to do anything they don't want to do. That doesn't mean that you have to be a chore nazi.

It was like pulling stale taffy to get my daughter to work. But in hindsight, I understand more about why. There are many people who automatically put up their dukes when they are told what to do. I believe it is a temperament characteristic. They have particularly sensitive radar to being asked to solve someone else's problem. So when you say, "It's your job to take out the trash. It's overflowing. Do it now," your strong-willed child will think, "Why do I have to? I don't care about the stupid trash. That's your job." And you know what? He's right. Eventually the argument wears thin, and you give up. Your job is to create a boundary that your child respects and understands. Own your own problems, but do ask for help in solving them. Everyone has problems-many people don't know how to ask for help. You are modeling well when you do.

Your problem is everything that has to get done around the house. You don't want to do it all anymore than your children do. You want help. Plain and simple. When children are ordered to do your bidding, they resist. Never dole out chores. They don't like feeling powerless in the face of something they hate. Neither do you. But they will choose to help when they feel respected and their own agendas are considered.

Have some type of a family meeting and tell them how much you need their help around the house. Eliminate the word chores. Try jobs, helping out, giving me a hand, etc. Make a list of things that need to be done and ask them which they would help out with. Explain that jobs can be changed, rotated, shared, etc. Tell them genuinely that you know working around the house is not how they want to spend their time and that you feel the same way. Fill them with your confidence that you know how helpful they can be and how good it feels to know you have helped. When you instill them with your trust, they are motivated to rise to the occasion. When you tell them how thoughtless and selfish they are, you have lost all influence to motivate.

Find ways of tapping into particular temperaments and talents. My daughter, now in her twenties, told me recently that she always hated doing chores "in isolation" or ones that gave her no sense of accomplishment. But she didn't mind setting the table at all. She did it with her brother and took pride in how she arranged the different colored plates and napkins. She had a system in her head of what colors went where and what napkins accompanied which plates. She also remembered fondly an extra job she had stacking bricks. She told me how she loved the

responsibility of making the bricks even and neat. So my daughter, who it seemed never wanted to help out, who was slow and methodical, actually enjoyed the jobs that appealed to her sense of individuality and imagination.

Don't give up if your child resists "regular" chores. I could ask my daughter to help me out in the moment, and she would chip right in. "These bags are really heavy. Could you grab this smaller one and help me get them in the house." Find what your children will be least resistant to. If you have a "whirling dervish", he is the one who might like to run upstairs really quickly to grab what you forgot. If you have a reader and writer, she might enjoy making grocery lists and helping read labels in the grocery store but hate stacking firewood. Remember your goal is to develop cooperation and pride in helping others, not to get a particular job done.

If you get resistance and think it just isn't worth the hassle to get your kids to do chores, start by asking yourself what it is they really don't like. Is it the helping part or the being forced and yelled at part? And my suggestion is never to attach allowance to chores. Allowance is for learning about the value of money. Chores are about learning the value of helping others. If you get into using allowance as a reward or punishment you will not teach these important lessons.