

“Do I have to?”

How chores teach self discipline.

Attendees to my parenting workshops are invited to sign in on a poster with the ages of their children/grandchildren, and write down their greatest fear and greatest hope for them. The most common greatest hope is for their kids “to be happy.” My greatest hope is always, “To move out and be financially independent.” That will make both of us happy.

Children need a group of skills to achieve happiness and independence. The most important skill a parent can impart is self-discipline -- the ability to do something when you don't feel like it. You summon self-discipline because something needs to be done, should be done, someone is expecting it to be done, and/or you will feel better when it is done, whether you like it or not.

Woody Allen said, “Showing up is 90 percent of life.” It takes self-discipline to show up at work on days when you don't feel like it. Self-discipline is essential to establish healthy habits – for our body, mind and soul. Like its twin sister self-esteem, self-discipline is essential.

One way to nurture self-discipline and self-esteem is by holding regular family meetings and setting up family chores. I'm not talking about getting up at 5 am to milk cows. Chores don't have to be complex or time consuming, but chores must meet the following criteria.

1. The chore must belong to the youngster. If Meghan doesn't empty the dishwasher, no one else does it. Dirty dishes pile up. Sister will complain that she can't do her job of loading the dishwasher. Parents must avoid the temptation to do the chore for the child, unless there are special circumstances, like production week for a play, illness or another legitimate reason. If Meghan has soccer practice at 5 pm, she plan ahead and empty the dishwasher as part of getting ready for soccer. This is where self-discipline and self-esteem are nurtured. Children feel connected to the family because other people are depending on her. Her contribution is important. Meghan learns planning and management skills and how to be part of a team.

2. The chore must be part of the daily routine. Parents must expect a child to perform the chore on a regular basis. They will be kind and firm in this expectation. Consistency is the bane of most parent's existence. It takes time and attention to create this practice.

When researching chores and comparing people ages 11 to 90 in a survey for my book, “Raising Able: How Chores Empower Families,” I found out why children did chores. The respondents of all ages overwhelmingly reported, “My parents expected it.” When parents show the right body language and expectation, children respond.

3. The chore must contribute to the greater good. “Clearing my dish” and “cleaning my room” **do not** qualify. Chores must connect the child to the family management and be a valued contribution. Again, the chore does not have to be complex. My kids started doing chores before they could talk by pushing

wet laundry into the dryer and matching socks. They advanced to emptying wastebaskets in the bedrooms, recycling, doing yard work, cleaning and cooking with the family. By middle and high school they could perform some or all of these jobs – and more -- independently. There is a complete list of chores by age group in my book.

4. The child must NOT be compensated for doing the chore. Doing something for money is the lowest form of motivation according to much research.

The art of management is getting other people to do what we want them to do. If the only way you can get someone to do what you want, you're teaching how to use money to manipulate others. You guarantee they will only do that task in the future when paid. My biggest problem with paying youngsters to contribute around the house is that the system is lopsided and destined for bankruptcy. Parents cannot afford to pay kids for everything. It is a bad model.

Here is how to solve it. When my son Noah was 8 years old, I called him to empty the dishwasher while I was cooking dinner. He said, "Mom, will you pay me for emptying the dishwasher?" The question caught me by surprise. Thinking quickly I said, "Sure, Noah. I'll pay you \$3 to empty the dishwasher. But dinner is \$5." End of conversation.

I recommend children up to age 12 receive an allowance. Children share in the work of the family and can enjoy the benefits of the family through a modest allowance. They pocket money can be spent on school lunches, or they can brown-bag it and save the money. This is an important life lesson. Children can use allowance money instead of pestering you to buy things for them in stores.

By age 12, kids can use self-discipline, skills and confidence learned from doing chores at home to earn money by working for others. Much could be said about kids, money and allowance. Here's the summary. This system teaches children to manage money and builds a work ethic. My four children, now ages 23 to 30, know how to live within their means, whatever it is. Isn't that the key to financial success – to live *under* your means?

5. The chore must be chosen by the youngster. This is where family meetings come in. When children choose activities and rules, they are more likely to abide by them. Family meetings are like self-discipline because they bring myriad results. See my free tip sheet on family meetings at my blog, www.raisingable.com/freetipsheets.

Family meetings provide a structure for a democratic home based on mutual respect. Family meetings are essential to positive parenting. They can be fun and challenging. Not every family meeting will be successful.

When leading the workshop, "Make peace with your mini-tyrant," I recommend families have family meetings two to four times a month to share power. It gives strong-willed children the opportunity to use leadership skills when serving as the facilitator. Everyone takes a turn at leading family meetings and being the scribe. Make sure to take notes and save them because they are funny and provide family

history later on. By age 10 or 11 kids are old enough to take notes. Their notes are much funnier than what adults write down, so encourage them to take a turn as scribe, even though it's a hard role.

By age three or four, children can participate in a short family meeting that includes compliments, new business, a treat to eat, and closing with family fun. By age 5, they can lead one with the help of a parent. Family meetings are essential for blended families because so much needs to be communicated and new connections created. Keep an open family meeting agenda on the fridge at all times so issues can be parked there, like "Ian leaves his backpack in the middle of the floor." "Where to go on vacation?" and "Dishes." Dishes was on our family meeting agenda for years. It was a project we worked together to solve.

Kids, tweens and teens may say, "Family meetings are stupid!" and refuse to come. This is normal. Invite, but don't make them attend. Of course, they may have to abide by decisions the family votes on. It's easier to establish the family meeting tradition with younger families. The same with chores. According to research by Marty Rossmann, Ph.D., children who do chores by age four will do better 15 to 20 years later than non-chores-doing peers. Rossmann also found that it's harder to get teens to do chores if they haven't done them previously and might not be worth the effort and power struggle to institute a chore system.

Of course, the more able to contribute a tween or teen is, the harder it is to get them to do chores. They're busy, they "forget," and they weasel out of doing what they promised.

When my youngest child got into trouble with the law at age 17, I couldn't remember the last time I had made her clean the powder room, or the last family meeting we had convened with Dad. At the time we got the call to bail her out, it was when she should have been home family dinner with us. Her older siblings would have never been in that situation because family dinner was held sacrosanct.

Sadly, research shows low rates of regular family dinner and even lower for chores. Less than one-fifth of children do chores. One reason is that families are too busy. I encourage families to simplify their lives and do things together instead of signing up for myriad sports teams and activities that keeps families on the run with no time for what I call the holy trinity -- family dinner, family chores and family meetings. The holy trinity takes time and it pays off because it creates a strong parent-child connection, the most effective way to keep kids safe and making good decisions.

On the poster I use to open my workshops, the "greatest fears" for our children usually include things like drug addiction, lack of social skills, choosing bad friends, anorexia, depression, suicide, failing at school, and more.

The challenge for parents is to use the first dozen years to establish a strong connection with children so when they become tweens and teens they will make good decisions when they're 60 miles away going 60 miles an hour -- usually in your car. Will they be wearing a seatbelt? With friends you know and approve of? Be where they said they'd be? Going the speed limit? Sober? Practicing safe sex or abstinence?

Teaching kids to make good decisions when you're not around requires years of establishing a strong parent-child connection, mutual respect and self-discipline. Family chores and family meetings can provide these desirable attributes. And you don't have to get up with the cows at 5 am to start.

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