

# Involving Children in Household Chores



## Developing the Will

BY BARBARA KLOCEK

New parents can be challenged to find the patience for and a purpose in the time-consuming daily tasks of feeding and caring for a new baby. This is an opportunity, though, for transformation of soul as parents learn to give freely of themselves and their time and energy. In the end, it is love for the child that brings meaning and joy into the unending repetition of these tasks.

As children grow, however, and become more capable of taking care of themselves and their environment, the tasks that parents continue to do can lead to parental resentment. This is especially true if it seems that they—the parents—are doing all the work and the children are becoming spoiled. It is important for children and for parents that all who are old enough work together in caring for the home.

When my three sons were four, six, and eight years old, I took my first trip of any length away from the family. The experience of being away made me realize that I was running a country club for my children by trying to do all the housework by myself. I sensed that there was a growing resentment in me and that change was needed.

One of the major tasks with three active, imaginative boys was

just keeping the house tidy. I wanted them to have fun playing, but I also wanted them to participate in cleaning things up. The boys, however, resisted my asking them to pick up. If I persisted, i.e., began to nag, everyone's mood soon turned sour. Sporadic threats and warnings of consequences had little effect. I had to figure out a way for us to work together harmoniously and to get the tasks done.

I came to see that the boys needed a rhythm in their chores. After some thought, I realized that if we did one good cleanup after dinner, before the boys went to bed, the house would stay tidy and clean for at least twelve hours. This would be a major advance, even though we would be sleeping for much of that time. Waking up to a clean living room promised to be and, in fact, proved to be especially wonderful.

Doing chores after dinner worked well, because we could all work together. It went especially well when my husband and I were able to take part with enthusiasm. Children easily intuit their parents' inner states. When I was able to bring joy into my voice and gesture, the boys picked up my positive mood and we all worked together as a team.

Having the chores after dinner involved some built-in consequences. If the chores weren't done on time, then the bedtime snack would be lost. If chores still weren't completed at bedtime, the bedtime story was also lost. Having an unavoidable consequence helped put the responsibility on the children rather than on the parent. I found that with practice I could remain calm and objective in my observations. "Oh dear, it's almost time for snack. I hope you'll get finished in time." This approach depends on being consistent in allowing the consequences to unfold. Bargaining with children tends to backfire. They usually are more willful and persevering than we are.

Soon this after-dinner activity became part of our evening pattern, and very little resistance was encountered. One challenge for my husband and me was to summon up the energy right after dinner to lead the work with enthusiasm, but it was a wonderful training. We all find ourselves in the course of life having to do things that we do not really want to do. It is a gift to ourselves and our children to learn to cheerfully step

over the inner resistance and find on the other side inner strength and the satisfaction of a job well done. Over time, this practice builds inner perseverance and confidence.

Establishing rhythm in activities is an important tool of the parent. Rudolf Steiner said that rhythm can take the place of strength and will. If we do the same thing at

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the same time each day or each week, it soon becomes an intrinsic part of our life. We do not need to summon up the energy needed to initiate it each time. In the realm of chores, rhythm is a magical and effective tool. If one can establish a specific, consistent pattern for doing chores, the children's resistance and the parents' need to nag will largely disappear.

As the children became older we had morning, evening, and Saturday chores. After much experimentation, we developed a pattern. Each morning, one child would wash the dishes, one would feed the animals, and one would hang out the clothes to dry. After dinner, one would do the dishes, one would clear the table and sweep the kitchen, and one would vacuum. On Saturday morning, I would make a list of chores, and everyone would do between thirty and forty-five minutes of work. These chores included cleaning the bathrooms, washing windows, mowing the lawn, helping clean the garage, and so on. As my sons moved into adolescence, they also began cooking one meal a week. At first the meals lacked love and attention. However, over the years, they all became fine cooks, and one of them would treat us to chicken pot pies made from scratch.

With two or more children, it is good to have a rotation of chores so that there is no danger of perceived unfairness. Chores and their assignment can be discussed at a family meeting at which each child's voice and each parent's is heard. A younger child, of course, should have simple tasks that he can manage. Otherwise, he can work with a parent or older sibling on a more complex or daunting task, such as cleaning up his room.

It is important that an only child also be involved in chores. I have seen that an only child, even of kindergarten age or younger, is happy to become a contributing member of the family. This becomes more important as the child becomes older. If everything is done for the only child, she will soon consider herself the princess of the world. When out in the world, this princess—or prince—will expect royal treatment from others. What a hard lesson it is to learn from classmates, roommates, or from a spouse that one is not royalty but just an ordinary person.

Establishing a pattern for doing chores greatly benefited our family. My resentment at running a country club vanished. The boys learned many new skills. They also learned about the joy of meaningful work and the satisfaction that comes from working together. My sons are now in their twenties and are known for their strong work habits and an ability to work well with others.

Inevitably there is the question: Should children be paid to do chores? I feel strongly that paying children undermines their experience of the joy of a task well done. It also takes away the sense of community that can develop in a family when everyone is helping, working freely for the good of all. In one family in which there was pay for chores, the children developed the attitude that they really didn't need to work unless they wanted the money. Therefore they never learned the joy that can come from the activity itself and from working together.

I found it easier to separate chores and paid work. On Saturday the boys received a reward of ice cream when they finished their chores. As they grow older and were

Another important and challenging issue in a family is allowances. Parents must deal with a number of questions:

- At what age should children begin to have their own money?
- How much should they get?
- Are they to buy necessities out of that money? Presents?
- What is the best way to help them learn to manage money?

When my sons were very young, I felt they did not need the challenge of counting, saving, and spending. But when each started first grade, he received his first allowance. Each week I gave each boy ten cents for every year of his age until he was ten. I never gave out more than \$1.00 per week for allowances.

I did not expect the boys to buy presents out of that money. It was their own mad money to spend on themselves. I decided they could spend their money when we went to the grocery store. It was interesting how each of them reacted. One of my sons would go and look, then save his money until he had enough for what he wanted. Another son had to spend all his money as soon as he received it. They learned much from each other. I did put restrictions on what they could buy. This was not so easy for me, but it was good practice for setting boundaries as the boys grew.

If the boys wanted extra money, I encouraged them to do baby-sitting and other work for the neighbors. My goal was that they would not look to their parents to supply their extra needs but would be motivated to

earn what they wanted. This bore good fruit during adolescence, since they began to seek out jobs at a relatively young age. Having this tension between what they wanted and what they could afford was a good experience for them. I was thankful that I was not in the middle of it. It was also a great experience for them to work for many different people doing many different jobs. One son's first summer job was helping a

landscaper. He told me later that he decided if he did not die during the first week, he would quit. By the end of the first week, he was enjoying the work and had

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wanting to earn money, I would sometimes find larger jobs, such as painting, for which I would pay them.

begun to develop calluses of which he was very proud. Throughout their adolescence, the boys had many jobs, from working at Starbucks to trimming trees. They learned from every experience and came closer through these experiences to finding what they wanted to do for their lifework.

I found one of the best ways to help them learn to manage money was to give them a clothes allowance in high school. At that age, they were not growing so fast and were becoming clothes-conscious. I kept track of how much I spent in six months. Then in August I gave each what I would spend on him in three months. At the beginning of every season, another clothing allowance was paid. The boys learned much from buying extremely cheap socks as well as from spending a whole allowance on a fancy jacket. They learned also about impulse buying and about quality in merchandise, and over time they learned to plan ahead. I was amazed at how each chose a different way to spend his money, but after four years, they all were confident about what they needed and where to get it.

For college expenses, I used the same system. It seemed that there should be a fairness about the amount of money each received. I was clear about what that amount was. If one boy chose an expensive lifestyle that caused a shortfall, he needed to work to make up the difference. As a consequence, they had various jobs while in school, and these often led to other opportunities. The boys became very comfortable applying for jobs and going through job interviews.

Achieving fairness within a family around housework and money is a constant learning experience. It is an opportunity for parents to teach their values to their children. Holding a family meeting in a regular rhythm provides a place to bring issues and to build trust and fairness. It is important to create a forum in which each parent and child has a voice but in which the parent retains the role of adult. This time can also be used to play games together, enjoy a treat, and to plan family trips.

The challenges of being a parent bring much growth, and the rewards include some of the richest relationships in one's life.

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Even a three- or four-year-old child can help care for animals and pets.

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