

Hecht: Parents, put 'em to work!

Pam J. Hecht, Special to WNC Parent Published 5:00 a.m. ET Oct. 21, 2019



Put your pre-teen on trash duty. (Photo: Getty Images / Imgorhand)

“What made you decide to have children?” my nosy — I mean, deep-thinking and inquisitive — son asked me the other day.

Free labor, I said ... to myself. To him, I lied. “Well, it was like a feeling, from the heavens, that it was our divine purpose ... it just felt like the right thing to do and ... aw, crap, I can’t do this anymore. We needed someone to mow the lawn.”

I have never been a very good liar.

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Turns out, parenting experts all agree that doing regular chores around the house is good for kids. Chores build skills like responsibility, a solid work ethic, a sense of community and self-reliance. Most importantly, they give parents more time to nap.

Chores are high excitement for the average, unsuspecting toddler or preschooler. (I was so thrilled to discover this that I encouraged relatives to skip the toy store and spoil them with cleaning supplies.) But the moment they become successful at helping out and are useful to have around, they lose interest and you have to prod.

When my daughter was 4, we made a chore chart together. She drew a picture next to each activity, such as putting away toys, cleaning the kitchen table and chopping vegetables, and we decorated it with stickers. Fast forward a few years and while her love affair with stickers stuck, the housework craze was history.

“When I have kids, I’m never gonna make them do chores,” my son said, after being threatened, I mean, pleasantly reminded, to do his.

I nearly choked from laughing so hard.

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Not chores. They're life skills

Chores involving survival skills like laundry and cooking are always a good idea. My kids have been doing their own laundry since they could walk. After all, is it my business if their socks all turn pink? Also, I don't even like doing my own laundry.

Meanwhile, it's been challenging to get either of my kids to (happily) make dinner for the family, a task that I regularly try to avoid by "forgetting" to buy meal ingredients.

When my son, who loved to cook when he was 3, recently balked at the idea of making dinner for us, I responded, "I'm not gonna be around to cook for you your whole life."

"Where will you be?" he replied.

Is it just me who sees more than one red flag I need to address here?

Maybe it would help if I were a better role model in this area. Unfortunately, when I know that it's time to mop the floors (because our socks are turning black), I binge watch Netflix.

To gloss over the extreme need to remove spider webs from the windows, I researched the topic and found out that spiders can be a good thing in a house because they eat other insects too fast for me to catch. Also, I didn't clean the toaster oven until it started a fire and almost burned down the entire kitchen. I suppose that was also setting a bad example.

"Will you take a bribe?" my son regularly asks, to avoid work around the house.

"Sure. Do you want a place to sleep?" I answer.

My next door neighbor employs her kids outside with all manner of yard work, which is a plus because 1) They are a good example of high quality labor, and 2) It proves that I am not the only parent out there torturing her children with unsavory chores. Unfortunately, my child apparently is a bee magnet who gets stung practically every time he's outside. (Though I do suspect that he plants beehives in our yard, just to avoid work.)

Here's an excuse to look out for: "I'll have more energy to clean after eating." Don't fall for that one. After eating, they'll have more energy to protest cleaning.

If that happens, just slap a sponge in their hand and remind them, lovingly, why you had them.

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