

Parenting Matters

Quarterly Newsletter

July 2006

For Colorado Parents

In Praise of Child Labor

"Hey, I saw your daughter mowing the lawn!"

People have said this to me several times in the past few years, as if they'd witnessed some cultural oddity that should be taped for television. A teenage girl mowing her family's lawn? It's as if they saw our cat driving the car.

Alyssa is now away at college, and she's noticed something about her peers: Many of them don't seem to have handled a lot of chores at home. For some of the young adults who are smart enough to attend this \$5 million-a-year university, walking into the laundry room with dirty clothes and a bottle of detergent presents a challenge never before faced by mankind. One student's mommy came to do the laundry for him.

This isn't as unusual as we'd like to think. It is one of the ways our children suffer from our affluence.

If you're like me, you had a lot of family responsibilities when you grew up: from setting the table and washing dishes to raking leaves, shoveling snow and cleaning bathrooms. Maybe you cared for younger siblings or painted the house.

You might even tell your kids annoying stories about how tough you had it so they can appreciate how easy life is for them—stories like, "I walked to school two miles uphill both ways." My best tale of hardship comes from when a hurricane knocked down our Weeping Willow when I was 14. Because the yard was my responsibility, I chopped up the tree myself— with a manual saw and a hand axe. It took a week.

We all learned several important lessons from such experiences. First, befriend people who own chainsaws.

Second, our ridiculous parents were right: Having chores is good for a young person. It builds good work habits. Builds discipline. Builds character.

A common observation among professionals who work with youth is that they respond well to having real responsibilities that matter. That means duties they own that bring natural consequences if they slip. They don't have clean clothes, the dog doesn't eat or the house looks too embarrassing to invite anyone over. That's more powerful than getting scolded by dad, although let's not throw out scolding.

Nevertheless, I'm not the only parent around here who sees that a lot of middle class kids have been liberated from meaningful family responsibilities.

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When Alyssa was in high school, many of her friends were puzzled that she had to take out the garbage before going to school on Friday mornings and vacuum the house before going out on Saturday nights. Alyssa noted that many of her peers had almost no such responsibilities. To her credit, she said this not as a complaint, but in amazement that they weren't being prepared for the independence they craved. I can't say Alyssa embraced every chore. To this day, the idea of raking leaves makes her eyes grow tired and her legs grow weak. But she's glad she knows how to take

care of herself; she's been doing her own laundry, for instance, since middle school.

Even when kids do have such real responsibilities, well-intentioned parental sexism often interferes. Boys are routinely freed from doing their laundry, and girls from moderate muscle work, like mowing lawns. Show me a girl who does yard work and changes a flat tire, and I'll show you a woman who isn't so dependent on men.

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Besides, having children share significant household duties takes some of the physical, mental and financial load off their parents—making us less stressed, which is a relief to everyone in the family. When I see a professional service routinely doing the lawn at a household with teenagers, I think: Isn't that what kids are for?

OK, I suppose it's good that we've evolved from the days when a main reason for reproducing was to create free labor. But have we evolved so far that we can give our kids cell phones, but not the lessons learned from important—even difficult—family and personal responsibilities?

Adults frequently say that one benefit to being more affluent than their parents is that they can provide a better life for their children than they had themselves. If that better life renders a child incapable of cleaning his socks, then maybe we need pay cuts.

When our children are little, we nag them to clean their hands. I also want them to get their hands dirty.

PARENTING MATTERS, PREVENTION WORKS

Patrick Boyle is editor of Youth Today, the national newspaper on youth work. Reprinted courtesy of The Gazette, Gaithersburg, Md.

Show Children How They Can Respect and Care for Nature

Children today spend most of their time indoors- in school, in their home watching TV, and riding in cars instead of walking.

Many are isolated from nature. Yet only by experiencing the natural world can they learn to respect and care for it.

Such caring is not just good for the environment, say experts. Positive outdoor experiences are an important part of healthy child development. They enhance learning and the quality of life over one's lifetime.

Parents can help children enjoy and value nature:

- Show how much you enjoy the natural world. Your own sense of wonder-more than scientific fact-is what will ignite your child's love of nature.
- Model caring and respect for nature. Talking about the Earth is far less effective than doing things like gently handling plants and animals, and properly disposing of trash.
- Try to go outside every day. A one-time trip to the park or nature center will have little long-term impact on a child. Kids learn best from frequent exposure.

Begin with simple experiences. For example, focus on a single tree in a backyard or playground before venturing out into a heavily wooded area.

POSITIVE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Let children learn from touching and experiencing-rather than your "teaching" them. Don't expect your child to "watch and listen" very long. Focus on what interests her.
- Turn typical playgrounds into environmental yards. Add bird feeders, wind socks, gardens, rock piles and logs.
- Give children tools for investigating the environment-like a magnifying glass, water hose, bucket, shovel and rake.

Source: "What Can I Teach My Child About the Environment". 1997 brochure (ACCESS ERIC, U.S. Department of Education, 800/443/ERIC).

*"Love is spelled T-I-M-E...
You have to be with a child today
to be in his or her memories
tomorrow"*

-Steffan T. Kraehmer,
*Quantity Time: Moving Beyond the Quality
Time Myth, 1994.*

Age-Appropriate Chores Help Children Learn Responsibility

Parents know that chores help kids become more responsible. But simply assigning jobs won't do the trick.

Chores also need to be age-appropriate. A job that's too hard, for example, will frustrate a child. A job that's too easy may not build self-esteem.

Here are some suggestions for chores based on age. Keep in mind that your child will probably need help learning these skills:

- **Two-year-olds.** Sort clothes by color. Wipe up spills. Help with preparing food (by stirring, for example). Pick up a few toys.
- **Three-to-four-year olds.** Help put away the groceries. Sort recycling. Put dirty clothes in hamper. Help fold and put away laundry. Set table with plates and napkins.
- **Five-to-six-year-olds.** Make bed. Feed pet. Pour drinks. Help with gardening. Set or clear table (except for sharp knives).

Source: Jenna Stanley, "Mommy's Little Helper,"
Parents, May 1999.

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PARENTING MATTERS, PREVENTION WORKS

FROM THE EDITOR: SUMMER READING

As the school year ends, children may have trouble remembering what they learned about reading. Libraries maintain interest in reading by offering summer programs. Children from early elementary school to high school select and read books on their own. Often a librarian gives a child a log in which he or she writes what was read during the summer. Promoting a love of reading is a wonderful goal. Because of this, many libraries offer "Read-to-Me" clubs for preschool and younger children. Take your children weekly to the library. Focus on a "weekly" topic, such as animals, dinosaurs or insects, or simply let the child explore the stacks and pull books of interest. Search both the non-fiction as well as fiction shelves. Then, spend time with your child reading!

Take Time to Work Directly With Your Child on Reading

You don't have to be an expert in reading to help your child excel in reading, researchers have found. All you have to do is take time to work directly with your child on her reading.

Doing things like these can greatly improve your child's achievement:

- **Listen to your child** tell stories and read aloud.
- **Help your child sound out** letters and words.
- **Watch as your child copies** letters and words.
- **Say a word** and let your child spell it.
- **Read to your child** (use books on recorded tape, if needed).
- **Play letter or word games** with your child (ask your teacher, or a librarian, to give you some ideas).

Source: Claude N. Goldenburg, "Low-Income Hispanic Parents' Contributions to Their First-Grade Children's Word Recognition Skills," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Vol. 18, 1987, American Anthropological Assn.

Fastbreak For Fathers

It's Only Housework! Or is It?

by Rich Batten

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Research

A study by Lee and Waite, published in the May 2005 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, compared estimates made by men and women of time spent on housework with clocked documentation of the actual time spent. Participants wore a watch that beeped once every two hours. Upon hearing the beep they wrote down the activity they were doing. From this, an estimate was made as to how much time was spent during a week on chores, such as shopping, cooking, washing dishes, laundry, cleaning the house, family paperwork and maintenance.

The findings indicated that most men over-estimated both their own time spent on household chores, and their wives! And wives over-inflate they own time substantially more than they inflate their husbands!

Want to discuss these findings with your spouse? Resist the urge to defend yourself, rather open a discussion that helps your family find a win-win solution to household chores:

Ideas

ACTION Plan

- **Spell out expectations:** know what is expected of all.
- **Help without being asked.**
- **Ask for help:** don't expect your family to read your mind.
- **Switch off on unpleasant chores:** take turns cleaning the toilet.
- **Involve the kids:** Their future roommate or partner will thank you!
- **Express appreciation...**daily.

- Original article edited to fit publication

MySpace - What's a Parent to Do?

There has been a lot of discussion lately about the various weblogs which are targeted to teenagers. MySpace is the largest of them, with about 42 million users. Kids post pictures there - some more tasteful than others - and answer surveys - not always truthfully - outlining their interests, loves, etc.

What's mystifying to an adult, is that kids think that these areas are private - for their eyes only. Ask a teenager if you can view his or her area on MySpace and they are likely to tell you that you "need permission." Hello? I need "permission" to view something on the web that is there for mankind to see?? Who's off base here?

Parents are scolded by some teens for viewing their weblog, creating unnecessary tension

MySpace.com has about 42 million users.

between parents and their teens. Parents walk on eggs while trying to keep their kids safe and smart in the way they portray themselves, and kids scold parents for snooping. Let us remember that a few years ago these areas didn't even exist... that would be why they have proliferated beneath the radar screen of parental awareness. But we're on top of it now, and as the world changes, parents need to update their rule books.

Smart parents will have a look at these sites, and a good honest discussion about the potential dangers with their teenagers. Remember the smart rules for internet safety

- Keep the computer in an open family space, NOT in a child's bedroom.
- Limit online time.
- Be aware of how your child is spending her online time.
- Educate your teens about internet realities – these areas are not private, and it is possible to trace users if they reveal even limited personal information.
- Never talk in open chatrooms.
- Never share your password or ask for the password from a friend.
- Never pose as someone you are not.
- When talking online, only say things that you would say if you were face-to face.

Sue Blaney, author Parenting Teenagers
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Putting Knowledge to Work



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