

Proof That Suffering Builds Character: What Kids Learn From Chores

Written by Dr. James G. Wellborn
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Like so many parental expectations and requirements, getting your kid in the habit of doing chores will help prepare them for the real world, if you can ever get them to move out. Here are some of the benefits kids derive from assigned chores:

- Responsibility (or “I’m not your maid.”) When you make a mess YOU are obligated to clean it up. The most straightforward reason your kid needs to do chores is to drive the point home that he is responsible for his actions in the world and the messes he makes.

- Personal Obligation (or “You helped create this mess now get up and help clean it up!”) When you live with other people, you’re obliged to contribute to the general upkeep of common living areas. Chores help your kid learn to pull her own weight when it comes to keeping shared spaces clean (so she doesn’t end up moving back home because even her friends consider her a slob).

- Organization and Prioritizing (or “You had plenty of time to get that room clean. You can just forget about going anywhere till it’s done!”) Chores are unpleasant for most kids. Unfortunately, life is filled with unpleasant but necessary tasks. Chores provide the chance for your kid to practice making time for necessary evils like routine maintenance in their schedule of otherwise fun or meaningful activities. This helps them learn how to plan, organize, prioritize and suffer.

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•Sensitivity for others (or “Just because it doesn’t bother you to wallow in filth doesn’t mean I’m going to live in a pig sty!”) It isn’t crucial that things be straightened or cleaned. Exposure to germs and disease can help build the immune system (if it doesn’t kill you first). But, there are some things you do because it is important to someone else (like, say, a spouse or the health department). Chores provide your kids with a clear message that the world doesn’t revolve around them and they need to take others’ feelings and sensibilities into consideration.

•Pride in a job well done (or “You call that done? Get back in there and finish cleaning that room.”) It is important to take pride in even the most insignificant tasks. Chores help your kids learn that every task, however base, is an opportunity to work their hardest and do their best. (The expression on their face when you feed them this line is priceless.)

Self-sufficiency (or “Why do I have to tell you every single time to replace the trash bag after you take out the trash?”) OK, this reason really isn’t that important. If your kid needs a lot of practice before he can skillfully take out the trash or sweep the floor, you have much bigger challenges than getting chores done.

Like so many time-honored parental expectations, household chores have a value more significant than the practical issue of household maintenance. That said, what is the most important reason kids should do chores? Because you said so, of course!

Dr. James G. Wellborn is a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Brentwood, Tenn., focusing on adolescents and families. To learn more about Dr. Wellborn, visit his website at: www.DrJamesWellborn.com