



## Routines and Responsibilities

by Oralie McAfee, Ed.D.

Most parents expect children to help with the routine chores of daily life in the family home. Besides putting away their own clothes and toys, children can help to set the table, clear away the dishes, and help keep the house clean and "picked up." When families share such chores and responsibilities, everyone benefits. Children learn to accept responsibility for doing their share, they have the satisfaction of contributing to the welfare of the family, and they learn many useful skills. Parents benefit from seeing their children develop responsibility, self-reliance, a spirit of cooperation, and—of course—from the actual help children can provide in the day-by-day functioning of the family.

It is all too easy, however, for the attempt to achieve family cooperation to turn into family conflict, with mom and dad yelling or nagging at the children. In such a situation, children usually end up doing what they are "ordered to"—but unwillingly and unhappily. Not all conflict can be avoided, of course, because development of desired attitudes and skills requires much time and careful guidance. It may often seem easier to do a task yourself rather than take the time and trouble to set up conditions so that your child can do what is expected. Keeping long-range goals in mind—and keeping your temper—will help. Use the ten suggestions listed below with consistency, firmness, and good humor, and you may be surprised at how much and how willingly your child will help.

1. Try to match assigned tasks to your child's abilities and interests. A regular chore at a regular time can help develop dependable habits in a child. On the other hand, children like some variety and challenge, so it is important to find other appropriate tasks besides "pick up your toys and clean up your room." Try to let children help when they are interested in helping. If children are always told, "You're too young for this" . . . "You can help with this when you are older" . . . or "We don't have time now" . . . they will soon stop trying to help. An occasional "Not right now" will not dampen childish enthusiasm, but if you say it too often, you're in danger of losing a helper.

Try to find tasks that obviously contribute to the welfare of the family. Not too long ago, children were

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expected to bring in firewood, help with the family garden, and do other work that was essential to the very survival of the family. In those days, children knew their tasks were important. In most families today, children's help is not likely to be necessary for survival, but it is essential to the smooth functioning of the family unit and the fair distribution of necessary chores. If both parents work away from home, or if one parent has responsibility for both family and income, children's help is needed just about as surely as it was in the past. In today's changing society, both boys and girls should learn how to do all kinds of home-related work. The old sex-role divisions are no longer valid.

3. Break large tasks into small chunks so that your child is not overwhelmed and can have the satisfaction of having completed a task well. Younger children may not be able to clean up a whole room, but they can put toys neatly on low, open shelves, and can do other simple "pick up" chores.

4. Work *with* your child, teaching the necessary skills as you work together. Any task is more interesting when you are with someone you love, and a child will stay at a job much longer if mom or dad is there. Matching socks, putting tools away, or taking household items into the rooms where they belong—such chores can develop important intellectual skills as well as habits of cooperation and responsibility.

5. Make necessary modifications in the home so children can take care of their own needs and carry out their assigned responsibilities. One of the reasons that children can take on so much responsibility in nursery school is that the room and furniture are specifically designed for them. Low shelves and drawers, child-height closet rods improvised from a broomstick and rope, and sturdy, tip-proof stools in kitchen and bathroom so that work spaces can be safely reached—these are examples of simple modifications that make it easy for a youngster to "do it myself."

6. Be flexible but consistent in your expectations. That may sound contradictory, but it really isn't. What you are after is an *attitude* of responsibility and cooperation toward the overall functioning of the family. If you are consistent in expecting that your child will help, the exact



task that he or she does is not important. We all like change, and some days even adults don't perform at their best. With children, these variations are even more pronounced. Some days, their favorite tasks may become uninteresting. Some "forgetting" is to be expected.

7. Don't expect perfection. Your child won't make the bed, set the table, or pull weeds as well as you do. If you constantly criticize or redo attempts to help, a youngster will soon stop trying. Gradually teach the necessary skills, building on what your child *can* do. Recognize, too, that children will probably want to develop their own ways of doing things, and these may differ from grown-ups' ways.
8. Model the attitudes and behavior you want your child to have, including pleasure and satisfaction in a job well done. If everyone else in the family pitches in to do what needs to be done, children usually will, too.
9. What about payment or special treats for doing chores? And what about withholding privileges for not doing them? Advice on this varies somewhat. In general, children are usually eager to assume "do it myself" responsibilities, so that neither bribes nor threats are necessary. On the contrary, parents have an opportunity

to help children develop a spirit of helpfulness because that is the way the family works together—not because each member is rewarded or punished for each specific thing done or not done. A better approach: let children understand that special events for the whole family can be possible if, through cooperation, the everyday chores can be taken care of efficiently and cheerfully.

10. Compliment and thank your child for efforts to help, as well as for the actual accomplishments. Sometimes the compliments *have* to be for the intention and the effort, as the actual result may leave much to be desired! "You worked hard at dusting everything, didn't you?" "You put the canned goods away all by yourself. Thank you."

It is sometimes difficult to keep concepts such as responsibility, self-reliance, cooperation, and "contributing to the family" in mind—as Gina takes forever to put away her toys, Jack leaves more paper on the floor than in the trash bag while emptying wastebaskets, and May's efforts at cooking leave the kitchen looking like a flour mill. Yet it is through such simple everyday tasks willingly—and sometimes unwillingly—done, that important, life-long attitudes can be fostered.