





CHORES THAT CHILDREN LIKE

The best time to start teaching household skills is when children are young and helping mother is a privilege

► Often during the question period at parents' meetings someone will ask, "How old do you think a child should be before he can be expected to share in household tasks?" I usually say, "Well, about two years old. Maybe a little younger." "No, I'm serious!" says the questioner. And maybe she'll add, "I have a twelve-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy and I can't get either one to do a thing. Most of our family arguments are on the subject of helping around the house!"

But, of course, I am serious, too. This education in sharing the work of the home actually begins in earliest childhood. "But who would want to make a toddler do little jobs around the house? And who could get him to take responsibility if he tried?" There are reproachful murmurs throughout the room. And I say, "Oh, we don't make the toddler share household tasks at all. We don't have to. At no later age will we get such enthusiastic help around the house. He begs to be allowed to dust. He wants to push the vacuum cleaner. He's ecstatic if you give him a sponge to clean the table top. He likes to make cookies, stir batter and pudding mix, break up salad greens . . ."

But here, I realize, I have lost my audience. "Yes, I know," says the mother of the ten and twelve-year-olds who won't do a thing around the house. "But the toddler is just playing. What I meant is how do you get older children to do work in the house?"

Then I begin to understand where the difficulty lies. Somehow we often (*Continued on page 98*)

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fail to see the connection between the small child's playing at work, imitation of his parents' work, and ability to do "real work" and take responsibility for household tasks later on.

If we do not understand this we may easily yield to the temptation to get the toddler and young child out of the way in order to get the housework or cooking done. After all, it takes three times as long to get the vacuuming done with a preschooler helping. And the four-year-old who insists on mashing the potatoes and stirring the batter for the cake will drag out the dinner preparations by at least an hour. Wouldn't it be better, all things considered, if mother got her housework and cooking out of the way quickly and efficiently and used the time saved for a quiet hour with the children?

I can sympathize with those who are tempted to do this. One of the most difficult problems for me as mother of a small child was to change my pace. As a woman who had worked for most of her adult years, I spent as little time as possible in household management and had worked out efficient procedures for cleaning, marketing and cooking. My small helper, of course, destroyed the system. But she was obviously having such a wonderful time doing everything "just like Mommy" that I soon realized that if I had devised entertainments for her I could not have found anything that pleased her more than tagging along with me and "helping." Later, I began to see, too, that this early sharing of work was also a way of strengthening the bonds between us.

All of this meant that I had to learn to dawdle and to move more slowly through certain parts of the daily routine. By the time Lisa was five she had graduated from pretend work to real helpfulness in cleaning, marketing and meal preparation. This doesn't mean that at five she had regular duties in the house, but she could take over small jobs and do them competently.

With a little practice, an early start and change of pace, we can manage meal preparations with a preschool helper and still get dinner on the table at the dinner hour. A three-year-old can break up salad greens and prepare puddings from packaged mixes. He can slice bananas and strawberries with a dull table knife. He loves to use an egg beater and if you anchor the bowl to prevent upsets, he can manage a thin batter or a whipped dessert. He can cut out cookies. At four and five, a child can use cake mixes and may even be able to measure a cup of milk and crack an egg into the bowl. Breeding veal cutlets is fun. So is mixing the hamburger and making patties. Decorating a ham with pineapple and cherries is easy. And if you have an electric stove (or an electric skillet that can be placed on a low table), a carefully supervised five or six-year-old can sauté onions, warm canned vegetables over low heat and start a simple sauce. My own five-

year-old can now take over every step in the making of a stew but the browning of the meat which I do because it must be done quickly at a high temperature. She has become very discriminating and after sampling the sauce with her spoon she will make such pronouncements as, "It needs something!" or "The sauce is excellent." She has finally reached the point where she is often a real help and not a pretend help in the kitchen, and we expect that at the age of nine or ten she should be able to take over preparation of many dishes on her own.

Often (but not always) she volunteers to set the table. She has been doing this for two years now and can place the silver and table accessories properly. She likes to choose place-mats and to work out color schemes. When there are flowers in the garden for cutting, she enjoys arranging flowers for the table. When she is in the mood, she creates special occasion centerpieces out of paper or clay.

Does she have any regular duties yet? No. While she is young and learn-



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ing these tasks, we don't want to turn them into duties. But she is already taking over more and more of these jobs on her own and doing them with pleasure. In a few years she may take over some of these tasks as part of her regular household responsibilities, but by that time she will have also found pleasure in doing these things. You can see what a sneaky mother I am.

A skeptical mother protests, "All this is fine as long as the work is fun, but just wait until there are clean-up chores to be done, the dirty work that you do because you have to. Then, Mrs. F., you're going to be in trouble!"

Maybe so. But then let's consider this: If you're ten years old and have never had any of the pleasures of meal preparation, then clearing the table and washing dishes may be just plain dirty work. If we have shooed a child out of the kitchen for nine or ten years because he is underfoot, we're really not in a favorable position when he is ten to ask him to take over the dirty work. But when a child has always had a part in meal preparation, and working along with mother has been the most natural thing in the world, the clean-up job can be taken with good grace as part of the total job.

How about keeping his room in order? At five or six, most children are willing to put away toys at the end of the day—at mother's suggestion. They are willing to help make the bed, or help with dusting, but no child of this age is really able to take over responsibility for keeping his room neat. If he surprises you sometimes by taking over and cleaning his room from top to bottom, don't think he's turned over a new leaf. He probably has a guilty conscience about something. Or maybe it's Mother's Day.

We can begin to teach orderly habits in an unobtrusive way during the preschool years. A good plan for storage of toys, books and clothing, for example, can save mother a lot of headaches and help a youngster toward neatness. We use inexpensive shelves for storage of blocks, games, trucks, stuffed animals, dolls, puppets and books. Blocks are stacked according to size and type, a system that every child has learned in nursery school or kindergarten and one that makes block play and storage easy.

Then for the hundreds of little things—the miniature animals, tiny dolls, junk jewelry for dress-up, dominoes, checkers, cards—we use clear plastic refrigerator boxes, and put each group of related toys in its separate box. The boxes stack nicely on shelves and their contents can be easily identified for use. This means that everything can be easily found when needed for a game, and there's no need to dump out a whole basket or box to search for the miniature horses you need for the ranch you're constructing with blocks. At clean-up time all the itchy-bitsy things that drive mothers to distraction can be quickly stored in their own boxes by the child, himself, or with his mother's help.

Don't get the impression that our playroom is neat or that it's always cleaned up completely at the end of a day. If there is a major project, say a block village, on the playroom floor and the builder has asked that it be left up overnight, we feel the wish should be respected. This is not the same as disorder or dirtiness.

The child's drawings hung up on the wall, the wooden airplanes and boats he constructs, his abstract sculpture in clay, may make his room look less than neat, but they are his work and they should be valued as such. We may not be able to grant them permanent exhibition space without renting additional quarters but they can enjoy at least a brief life after creation. A child whose creations are daily swept out with the rubbish in the name of good housekeeping will soon lose his pleasure in creation. He may even conclude, since all play is regarded as messy by his mother, that he will do better to sit before the TV set which creates no housekeeping problems.

In teaching order we need to make allowances for a child's needs. I think most of us would settle for a small child's agreement to put away toys



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after a game or a project has been concluded, and to help mother put his room in order, as well as to share other household tasks he enjoys doing.

When children have shared their parents' work from earliest childhood on, the transition to taking responsibility takes place naturally around the age of nine or ten. By this time a girl may have achieved real competence and pride in cooking, cleaning and caring for her own room. A boy may accept, quite naturally, responsibility for his own room and for operating household machinery for his mother. If he is mechanically inclined he may be able to take over some of the household repair jobs he has learned to do with his father. There's no need, then, to post a schedule of duties on the bulletin board. A group of people who have worked together for several years tend to fall into an easy partnership on household matters.

Should children be paid for their household jobs? I, personally, would not like to put this work on a fee basis. If sharing of work is part of family living, I don't know why we should pay for it or give the child the impression he is doing something extraordinary.

BUT what about those ten and twelve-year-olds who started off this discussion, the ones who "won't do a thing around the house"? Somehow, I suspect, the whole business of household duties got caught up in conflict between mother and children. One day, perhaps, when the children were eight or nine years old, mother got weary of picking up clothes and clearing the table after her family had fled and she made a speech, beginning—"From now on . . ." "You're both old enough!" it went on. And "We're going to have a few rules around here!" and "Arthur will take the trash out every night and make his bed every morning. Debby is to clear the table and stack the dishes and make her bed every morning." As mother issued her orders in a voice that grew increasingly shrill, the ears of her young ones received the message and then tuned it out like an obtrusive commercial. The following morning the beds were unmade and the first of a long series of clashes occurred.

We can't blame this mother for her blowup and we're not surprised either to find that the two youngsters in this family behave as if their constitutional rights to be slovenly had been trampled upon. As a disciplinary technique, a blowup won't work, of course. There are better solutions.

It would have been easier, I think, if both these youngsters had had the daily experience of sharing household tasks from the earliest years on. But it's not too late at ten or twelve, either. After all, at this age we also have the advantages of reason and conscience. Parents can present the necessity of the whole family's participating in household tasks and can invite the children to help work out a fair plan. A child who is given his choice may choose certain jobs that he likes to do, and because he has elected

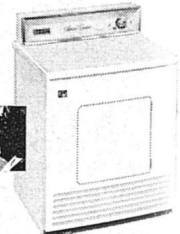


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to do them, there may be considerably less conflict.

At the same time, both parents can consider ways in which to show their youngsters that there is pleasure in the doing of housework. The daughter who had felt in the way during meal-time preparations can be tactfully invited into the kitchen and given the opportunity to experiment with foods that she likes to prepare. And if she tries to skip out on the clean-up part of the job, there can be a tactful reminder, "Look, Debby, nobody really likes cleaning up, but we've had a lot of fun working on this meal and this is the small price we pay for it. I'll help you clean up, now, and I'd appreciate your help after dinner, too."

A father, too, can help. By helping to clear the table or stack the dinner dishes he is telling his ten-year-old son that this kind of help is not an affront to masculinity. And if father's household hobbies include gardening or carpentry, he may consider ways to share the pleasure of these activities with his son. It's easier to persuade a youngster to weed the garden when he has shared in creating the garden.

For the time spent and the patience expended in using the often inept help of children, the rewards are great. The work gets done, making life easier for the parents; the children learn how to accept responsibility; and even more important, the sharing of work creates a special kind of intimacy between parents and children. END

FAMILY MOVIE GUIDE

(Continued from page 10)

is disturbingly revealed during a soul-sick young man's last 48 hours in Paris following the decision to take his own life. Although he is still young, and his friends from the past all indicate their love and concern, he is unable to find the will to live. His futility in the face of this seems absurd, and it is this absurdity which ends up being the ultimate tragedy. French. English subtitles. A-Matter of taste. Y & C-No. (Gibraltar)

FLIGHT FROM ASHIYA—The U. S. Air Force Rescue Command backgrounds this adventure tale of three of its heroes. A Japanese freighter is sunk in a typhoon and two planes fly from Ashiya Base to pick up survivors. During the course of the suspenseful operations, the personal stories in flashback of pilot Richard Widmark, co-pilot George Chakiris and paramedic Yul Brynner show the reasons for their dedication to the preservation of life. Color. A-Good. Y-Mature. C-No. (U.A.)

FOR THOSE WHO THINK YOUNG—Pamela Tiffin is a college girl intent on getting an education and James Darren is the wealthy playboy whose suit she spurns in this lightweight film. Pamela is being supported by two uncles who are entertainers in a local dive until one of them (Woody Woodbury) discovers a flair for comedy that makes him popular with the college crowd. The course of true love is complicated by Darren's uncle who doesn't want his nephew to marry beneath him and tries some absurd tactics to make trouble. Color. A & Y-Amusing. C-Less interest. (U.A.)

FOUR FOR TEXAS (Feb.) Sex and violence let up for hardly a moment in vulgar, tasteless post Civil War western. Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin. Color. A-Matter of taste. Y & C-No.

FROM RUSSIA, WITH LOVE—The impeccable James Bond (Sean Connery) of the British Secret Service returns to the screen to outwit his enemies in a typical melange of offhand sex and casual sadism. The megalomaniac society, Spectre, home office of the late Dr. No, is out to acquire a new Russian decoder and polish off Bond at the same time. The plot involved is complicated to the point of absurdity and takes place primarily in Turkey. Color. A-Good of kind. Y & C-No. (U.A.)

FUN IN ACAPULCO (Nov.) Elvis Presley, stranded in Acapulco, finds a job and two romantic entanglements, and sings a sombrero full of songs. Color. A & Y-Good. C-If Presley fans.

FURY AT SMUGGLER'S BAY (Mar.) Murder and mayhem result when gang of cutthroat smugglers blackmail county squire in 19th century English swashbuckler. A & Y & C-Routine.



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