

How to get kids to do chores

If you don't want to go through the process of arguing with your children over chores, the following list of tips will help get them involved in doing chores.

1. Start young

Younger children (under six years old) are dying to be just like Daddy or Mummy and often offer to help. This is a golden opportunity. Use it. Some creative thinking may need to be involved when coming up with the right chores for this age group: The task you're doing may be dangerous, or perhaps involving your child will increase the mess quotient or take longer. But try to find an aspect of the task that the child can safely do.

If you're peeling potatoes for example, form a small production line and ask the child to take the rinsed potatoes out of the sink, shake them off and put them in a bowl.

Little events like this through the week will blur the line between work and play and begin to build positive habits. It's brainwashing, but in a good way!

2. Make it age-appropriate

The premise is this: Begin with simple, safe tasks under supervision. Then look for opportunities for them to complete a short task without you in the room but let them know you're coming back in just a minute to see if they've completed it.

For example, kids of all ages can get involved in the garden. Younger kids can water the plants while older kids can pull weeds or transplant seedlings to a bigger pot.

Of course, when a child is learning new things that involves a safety risk—cutting up fruit with a knife, for example—they should have close supervision. Hover at will.



Birthdays are one milestone that can be used to tell the child they're now old enough to learn a new skill—to operate a lawn-mower, for example. In this way chores become a rite of passage and matter of pride for the growing child.

Be prepared to flex a bit—you can pull back from allowing a child to do a particular task if they clearly don't have the physical strength, coordination or maturity. You could also work alongside them for a bit longer than you originally envisioned.

While a younger child will need to be asked to help with a task every time, an older child can be expected to remember to do a particular chore every day or once a week—feeding a pet, for example. For primary-aged children, a roster or chart is a fun way to remind them of their responsibilities. High-schoolers will probably respond better to an electronic reminder.



3. Keep it positive and relational

Use age-appropriate chores as an opportunity to affirm your child. Thank them for helping and tell them what a good job they've done. As they grow they'll be able to appreciate more specific feedback; that they did a task quickly, thoroughly or with some extra loving details. If the positives are emphasised, the negatives will be less discouraging. Because, as children grow, the negatives need to be pointed out.

Don't expect a learning child to get it right every time—you may need to give a little demonstration on the finer points, more than once. Avoid an exasperated response of, "For goodness sake, forget it; I'll just finish it myself!" If you can work together to complete a task "properly" the child can enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done.

You're developing resilience—teaching your child how to deal with criticism—as well as having a bonding moment as you mentor your child in important life skills. Sticking at a task until it's properly completed—including cleaning up afterwards—is a character attribute worth fighting for. Insist. They'll hate you now; they'll appreciate it later . . . possibly much later.

4. Keep it consistent and fair

Teaching your child self-discipline requires parental self-discipline. For older children, try to maintain a regular schedule of chores so that the expectations are clear. If the schedule is agreed together as a family and posted on the fridge for all to see it will be easier to enforce. There'll also be less argument when penalties are applied for failure to complete chores.

While we're on that, try to make the penalties match the crime—"No dinner for you until the dog has had his dinner," for example; "He goes hungry, you go hungry."

Children often have a strong sense of justice; they'll compare their chores with those of other family members—especially their siblings. They'll also notice (or imagine) differences in their respective responsibilities. Be ready with your reasons: "Because she's younger"; "Because she also brings the bins in." Or be ready to adjust the chores regime if your child has a legitimate point.

A child will often develop a dislike for a particular chore—they'll hate it even more if they feel permanently saddled with it. One strategy is to swap chores from time to time—it deals with any niggling "not fair" complaints as well as teaching kids how to complete a wider range of household tasks.

Try to be aware of gender too: depending on your family background it may be easy to unconsciously identify certain chores as "boys' jobs" or "girls' jobs". Try to avoid this. Every child deserves the opportunity to learn the full range of indoor and outdoor household skills—you never know what kind of living arrangements they'll have as adults. You may also have to push yourself to lead by example; look at how the adults in the household divide the workload and, together, do your best to achieve a fair division of labour between the sexes. Otherwise, be prepared for some stern words from your household's emerging feminist.





5. Keep it interesting

Most young children will participate readily in a job that has been creatively tweaked. Folding the laundry can become a guessing game: “Whose undies are these?!” And what’s not to like about The Clean Dishes Song—the one you just made up on the spot?

Older children will respond to competitions and challenges. If the stakes are heightened by the prospect of a reward or a looming deadline, so much the better—“If we can get the yard mowed and tidied by 11 o’clock we can go to the beach for a swim and an ice-cream!” [Hint: this strategy also works on parents.]

For regular daily chores a star chart is a good way for children to track their progress towards a goal—“Two weeks in a row of remembering to put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket without being asked will earn you a trip to the movies!” Yes, this is dangerously close to a “chores for pocket money” scam, but let’s concede that sometimes a little extra motivation can go a long way.