

INVOLVING CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLD TASKS: IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

Parents of the world, take note: You can make a big difference in your children's future by asking them to take out the trash. And do the laundry, wash the dishes, make the beds, put away the toys

Research by Marty Rossmann, emeritus associate professor of family education, shows that involving children in household tasks at an early age can have a positive impact later in life. By involving children in tasks, parents teach their children a sense of responsibility, competence, self-reliance, and self-worth that stays with them throughout their lives.

How the research on involving children in household tasks works

Rossmann explored outcomes for 84 young adults based on an in-depth study of their parents' style of interacting with them, their participation in family work at three periods of their lives (ages three to four, nine to 10, and 15–16), and a brief phone interview when they were in their mid-20s. Variables such as parenting styles, gender, types of household tasks, time spent on tasks, and attitudes and motivators connected to doing the tasks were analyzed for their relationship to outcomes for the children.

Rossmann looked at previously unexplored data collected from a longitudinal study by Diana Baumrind, famous for its analysis of authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting styles. Baumrind started her study in 1967 using a sample of parents and children living in the San Francisco Bay area. Rossmann's own family had been a part of the study.

What the research shows

Using measures of individual's success such as completion of education, getting started on a career path, IQ, relationships with family and friends, and not using drugs, and examining a child's involvement in household tasks at all three earlier time, Rossmann determined that the best predictor of young adults' success in their mid-20s was that they participated in household tasks when they were three or four. However, if they did not begin participating until they were 15 or 16, the participation backfired and those subjects were less "successful." The assumption is that responsibility learned via household tasks is best when learned young.

How the tasks are presented also influences children's abilities to become well-adjusted adults. The tasks should not be too overwhelming, parents should present the tasks in a way that fits the child's preferred learning style, and children should be involved in determining the tasks they will complete, through family meeting and methods such as a weekly chore chart. They should not be made to do the tasks for an allowance. The earlier parents begin getting children to take an active role in the household, the easier it will be to get them involved as teens.

What others say about involving children in household tasks

Rossmann brings practical findings from her research to the public by making presentations to parent educators, at PTA meetings, at the Minnesota State Fair, and to a filled-to-capacity room at an international meeting of psychologists in Stockholm. The research has directly impacted the work done by fellow researchers and authors, parent educators, and parents.

Jean Illsley Clarke—director of J.I. Consultants, widely-published author, and alumna of the college—is featuring Rossmann's research findings on children doing household chores in her upcoming book on overindulgence, *Indulge Them Less, Enjoy Them More: Finding a Balance Between Giving More and Saying No to Your Children*. Clarke explains that in the book's three separate overindulgence research studies, "adults who were overindulged as children reported not having to do household chores as the most frequent way they had been overindulged. The pain that many of them experienced as children, and even more during adult life, presents a sad picture of lack of skills and low self-esteem. Marty Rossmann's research offers independent and important information on the role of chores."

Kris Loubert, parent educator at the Early Childhood Family Education program for Minneapolis schools, says that "involving children in household tasks is a topic parents typically want to discuss, especially parents of three- to five-year-old children. The good news about Rossmann's research is that getting children involved early (preschool-aged) in household tasks seems to have a 'payoff' beyond getting kids to learn how to keep a home in order. The responsibility learned via putting those toys away positively affects their success in young adulthood—at the university, in their careers, and in their families. The parents I work with all dream of success in these areas for their children."

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"I hear parents of young children complain about how difficult it is to get kids to cooperate and how difficult it is for them to follow through with their children to the completion of a task. They often will say it easier if they just do the housework themselves. I believe Rossmann's findings could create more resolve in parents to teach, work with, and be more patient with their children as they learn how to contribute to the upkeep of the family home. Teach your kids responsibility and contribution at home early and they are likely to be successful later in life."

Wendy Wicks, president of the Dowling School PTA (Minneapolis), organized a presentation by Rossmann for parents which they found "inspiring."

"Rossmann's presentation on household chores increased our awareness of leveraging opportunities to assign our kids easy tasks on a weekly basis. After learning about the positive outcomes of those children who participated in household tasks at an early age, I think the Dowling parents who attended this presentation will be looking for ways to regularly involve their children in helping around the house."

Why this research matters

Involving children in household tasks at an early age helps them learn values and empathy as well as responsibility. It is important for children to internalize values when they are young because household responsibilities continue to play a significant role throughout one's life. Young adults are living on their own longer and they need to have household skills as part of becoming well-adjusted adults. Managing household responsibilities can be the biggest cause of stress in marriages. "There's a lot of talk about family values, but little action," Rossmann says. She would like to do more work in this area that would replicate the study with a larger sample of the population and groups that represent greater diversity.

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