



How to finally— seriously, we mean it, for real this time—get your kids to clean up

You've tried bribes and charts and screaming at the top of your lungs. But don't throw in the towel (or, ahem, hang it up for him) just yet. Here's how to make the training stick.

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CHILDREN SHARING in household duties—willingly, without a sponge being thrown at them—sounds terrific. But getting there is a long and, yes, messy process—one that often doesn't seem worth it. Not only do you have to teach them how to load the dishwasher but you also have to wrestle with the following: Is it important that they load it like you do? How long do you nag until you just do it yourself? And is it the best use of their time when they get home late from debate practice and have mounds of homework? Here's the thing: Cleaning is a crucial life skill. "Research shows that doing chores as a child is a predictor of professional success. If we don't teach children that life requires a willingness to do crummy stuff, we are not giving them the tools it takes to thrive," says Julie Lythcott-Haims, the author of *How to Raise an Adult*, who, as Stanford University's dean of freshmen, started noticing that her incoming students were lacking in practical skills. She discovered that parents—like her—who failed to teach their kids to pitch in were partly to blame. "We are doing too many mundane tasks for them," she says, "want-

ing to be loved, trying to make life easier.”

Foisting those duties on your kids will be difficult—at first. Keep two things in mind. First, cleaning chores need to be second nature. “If it’s a habit, it ceases to be a source of conflict,” says Gretchen Rubin, the author of *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*. That means it needs to be easy. (Won’t put a coat on a hanger? Buy a hook.) Second, don’t be a tyrant. Have an all-for-one vibe where everyone pitches in because he or she is part of a family, not because Mom will yell if you don’t. “Kids need to know that their help is valued. So appreciate it. When there’s less shame and guilt, kids tend to get with the program,” says Laura Markham, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and the author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*. If they don’t? Blame the plan, not the kids. You may be expecting too much for where they are developmentally. (Or the hook is just too high.) These tips will help ensure that your dirty work has long-lasting results.

WHAT IF...

You’ve been doing everything for your kids from Day 1. (Isn’t that being a loving mom?) And now they’re tweens who don’t know where the hamper is.

It’s never too late to start teaching them, says Julie Lythcott-Haims, whose kids were also tweens when she stopped waiting on them hand and foot: “Sit them down and, in a tone neither mean nor apologetic, say, ‘You are old enough to help out.’ When my kids asked why, if it’s so important, we never asked them to help before, we said, ‘That’s our mistake. But you need to learn these things, and it’s our job to help you do it.’”

TODDLERS

TEACH THEM TO...

Hang up coats, pull up bedding, put clothes in hamper, bring plates to sink.

Toddlers think of work as play, making this the ideal time to turn what they’ll think of as drudgery later into habits now. “Toddlers don’t have an internal sense of time or sequence. Putting a toy away so they can find it later isn’t a reward. But following routines gives them a sense of calm,” says Tovah Klein, the director of the Barnard College Center for Toddler Development and the author of *How Toddlers Thrive*. Use that to your advantage. Institute consistent tasks that you guide them through at the same time each day. “They also feel a sense of accomplishment, which develops independence,” says Klein.

FOR BEST RESULTS...

KEEP IT FUN. Wearing underwear on your head while you race them to the dresser is a surefire way to get them interested. “And don’t get exasperated if they can’t manage,” says Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington and the author of *Getting to Calm: The Early Years*. Power struggles equal the end of cooperation, so if they balk, don’t dig in your heels. Instead, have fun giving them an assist. “Your goal is to establish a routine so that someday it’s autopilot,” she says.

SAFETY OUT LOUD. Repeat little mantras. “Say, ‘When we come in, we hang up our coat. When we eat dinner, we put the dish in the dishwasher. When we take our bath, we put laundry in the hamper.’ In time, they will lead the way,” says Klein.

MAKE THEM MINI ME’S. Toddlers will do almost anything that involves imitating you. Amy Palanjian, the author of the *Best of Yummy Toddler Food* books and blog, says, “I cut sponges in half to fit my three-year-old’s hands, and she helps me wash dishes. You’d be surprised at how good little hands are at getting measuring cups clean.” Or buy a kid-size laundry basket that lets them fold and carry a load. When it’s time to scrub the bathroom or kitchen, give toddlers their own caddy, filled



with little brushes and cloths, so they feel as if they're pitching in, says Becky Rapinchuk, the founder of CleanMama.net. (She makes a kid-safe cleaning spray with 1 cup water, ¼ cup vinegar, and up to 20 drops of lemon or orange essential oil.) It also promotes a team mentality—that *everyone* helps clean the house, not just grown-ups.

COPY PRESCHOOL. Once your child starts school, he'll have a set of routines for picking up the classroom. Use them. "Why have a whole new way to hang jackets, clear the table, or store blocks?" asks Kastner. Instead, try to capitalize on the cubby system and buy similar storage bins. You can even learn the school's cleanup song.

ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL KIDS

TEACH THEM TO...

Put away coat and backpack, pick up toys, clear table and load dishwasher, wipe out bathroom sink and tub, vacuum, dust, clean toilet.

"Kids this age like learning and becoming competent at stuff," says Kastner, which makes it a great time to add some more complex jobs, like vacuuming, that go beyond picking up their own things. Even if you have a housekeeper, kids can still learn to scrub a toilet before company comes and wipe out the tub after a bath. One caveat: "Young kids want to become masters of their own universe," says Kastner. "It's your job to make tasks achievable for them. This is the age when parents can get into trouble. You may have been asking nothing of your kids and suddenly jump from zero to one hundred. Go slow and steady."

FOR BEST RESULTS...

BREAK IT DOWN. Parsing jobs into easily visualized steps helps children have more ownership over the process. Kids don't know what to do when you tell them to "tidy" their rooms, so write down a concrete list of three or four steps—put dirty clothes in hamper; hang clean clothes; dust top of dresser—that they can follow, says Kastner: "This helps organize the task in their minds."

PUT LIKE WITH LIKE. When setting up a child's bedroom or playroom, organize it by zones. "Decide together on the three to five activities that they do in the room," says Julie Morgenstern, the author of *Organizing From the Inside Out*. "Then store every-

thing where they do it for easy cleanup." You might not think to put small plastic sea creatures and Magna-Tiles together, but to the child who spends hours building geometric, shark-powered submarines, the combination makes perfect sense.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHERE THINGS REALLY "GO." Extend the activity-zone idea to the whole house. Say your kids do homework at the counter while you cook. Don't make them store textbooks and school supplies at their desks. Instead, give them a shelf in a kitchen cupboard for the books. "I put trays on the countertop, and that's where the supplies live," says Barbara Reich, a professional organizer and the author of *Secrets of an Organized Mom*.

RETHINK RECYCLING. Tidying up after an elementary-school homework project or a group art date can send kids into a tailspin. "Worksheets, coloring paper, tiny cut-up scraps—it's all hard to pick up," says Amanda Wiss, the founder of the organizing firm Urban Clarity. She recommends putting recycling bins wherever your kids work so they can throw away as they go. Make it something cute (an old wooden apple crate or a basket) to make you happy.

CALL FOR A TEAM CLEAN. When kids are asked to help with the weekly cleaning of bathrooms or bedrooms, they are certain to get distracted. It's normal. So instead of asking everyone to tackle his own room, make your way from bedroom to living room as a family—a single, unstoppable cleaning force. "One person fluffs pillows; another dusts," says Morgenstern. "Meanwhile, you can monitor the work and set the tone and energy level." Bonus: You finish way faster.

WHAT IF...

Your kids clean up but leave you with streaked mirrors and a jumbled dishwasher—and you're a neat freak. "Do not reload the dishwasher in their presence," says Markham. "Kids need to feel like their contributions are valued." That said, you can teach as you go, as a collaboration. Says Markham: "Say, 'Great, you cleaned the mirror. You know, there's a streak right where my face is. Let's try a paper towel on that.'"

You stopped fighting your son about keeping his room clean. But now it smells, and there are crusty cereal bowls everywhere. Before you tell a child that you won't poke your nose in his bedroom, set ground rules. For example: If you're going to eat in your room, bring out the dishes every night or face consequences. Waking him up early to scrub cereal bowls will have an impact.

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TWEENS

TEACH THEM TO...

Do all of the above, plus any other routine household task they haven't yet learned, like mopping the floor or doing laundry.

"By the time kids are 11 and 12, they are sensitive to how others see them," says Markham. "That makes them more interested in their appearance, but also in their home." Of course, their standards will be different from yours (see the next page about leniency when it comes to the bedroom). But this can be an opening for chores—doing laundry or organizing the closet—that play to a desire to present their best selves.

FOR BEST RESULTS...

ASSIGN A DRAWER. Makeup, deodorant, acne lotion. Middle schoolers with their changing bodies collect lots of flotsam—and it all lands on the bathroom sink. Clear a drawer or provide a basket for them to dump it all. And toss in some cleaning wipes for the sink while you're at it, says Jeanie Engelbach, the founder of ApartmentJeanie.com.

MAKE ROOM FOR EXTRA TOWELS. Your

little Narcissus suddenly needs one for her body, two for her hair? Add S hooks to the towel rod so there's room for all to hang side by side.

TIME 'EM. Even kids who have been clearing dishes for years will balk as their homework load increases. But it takes less time than they (and, frankly, you) think that it does, so set a timer for proof. "Bet them they can't get the job done in 10 minutes," says Wiss. If they don't quite make it, see if they can come up with tricks for shaving off a minute or two, then try again the next night.

CREATE A DONATIONS BIN. Getting rid of old toys and too-small clothes is crucial for keeping a house clean, but persuading a kid to spend all of Saturday morning going through stuff is a long shot. Instead, have a spot in the house where they can put things as they decide they're through with them. Allowing kids to purge on their own terms gives them a sense of control, says Wiss.

MAKE A PUNCH CARD. Fun still matters at this age. Wiss suggests customizing loyalty business cards at a site like Zazzle.com, then giving them a punch each time your kid takes on an onerous chore. Reward: a double chocolate-chip Frappuccino.

TEENAGERS

TEACH THEM TO...

Do all of the above, plus bigger jobs, like cleaning the garage, and tasks they'll need to know how to do in college. (Disinfecting a mini fridge?)

By now, your teens may be more or less in the habit of putting away homework, clearing dinner, and even vacuuming on weekends. So go ahead and toss in an extra job now and then. "They need to get used to the idea that in life your boss will ask for more than your job description," says Kastner. Just don't blow your top when you find them texting, not sweeping. "Teens get distracted by whatever is in front of them. They're not being jerks—it's biology," says Frances Jensen, M.D., a professor of neurology at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *The Teenage Brain*. That's because a teen's frontal lobes (the part of the brain governing empathy, judgment, and cause and effect) aren't fully developed yet. They still need clear directions—and patience.

FOR BEST RESULTS...

FACE FACTS. Your teen simply doesn't have the ability to ignore messages from friends while doing a boring task. Instead of lashing out (or giving up), gently nudge him back to reality. "I'm not saying be lenient—just treat teens like a hybrid between child and adult," says Jensen.

STAY OUT OF THEIR SPACE. Constantly fighting about his bedroom? Shut the door. "Our kids' rooms are their domain, where they get a break," says Lythcott-Haims. Morgenstern agrees: "Their lives are complicated and in transition, and their space reflects that. What looks messy to us might make perfect sense to them."

LAY IT OUT. Teens aren't big extrapolators. If there's a multistep task before them, like tidying after friends leave, list what needs to be

done. "Put your arm around them and say, 'OK, so we need to uncrumple the rug, put the afghan back on the couch, and scoop up the snack wrappers,'" says Markham. When they come back with "Ugh! I'll do it later!" remind them that it will take only a minute and it's not fair to others to leave common rooms a mess. "Teens are not uncaring—they're just otherwise occupied," says Morgenstern.

DON'T TALK, POINT. When tensions run high, reminding your teen to wash the dishes might be the flame that ignites the fireworks. Kastner suggests listing agreed-upon tasks on a whiteboard. "If you've been clear about consequences, you can just point to the board and say, 'This is your reminder. I want you to be successful so that you don't lose your phone,'" she says. "That's very different karma from nagging."

WHAT IF...

You only want to know the all-age, every-room, no-fail cleaning tools you should buy in bulk.

The simple answer:

Hooks. For coats in the entryway, towels in the bathroom, and jeans you can't get your son to fold, every expert we asked offered this solution. They also mentioned: **Boat totes.** They come in all sizes, they're sturdy, and their role can evolve, from storing toys to carrying laundry, says Jeanie Engelbach. **Labels,** whether it's Sharpie on wash tape or from a label maker. Kids need easy clues about where to put stuff. **Trash cans.** Not just in the kitchen but by their beds and the couch, too. "If kids have to walk across the room, gum wrappers don't get thrown away," says Barbara Reich.



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