

Why Are Chores Such A Chore?

From "An Allowance is Not a Bribe" by Allan M. Gonsher, LMHP, CMSW

Your children shouldn't be given a free meal ticket to life. They shouldn't have maids called "Mothers" cleaning up after them, doing their laundry and giving them meals. Your children should be responsible for doing specific jobs around the house.

The main reason chores become such a chore is that your children have no clear understanding of what you expect of them. That's why I've designed the "4Bs" system with specific chores children are responsible for and consequences for not satisfactorily completing them. Starting at age six your children can be responsible for bedroom, bathroom, breakfast and backpacks.

Here's how the "4Bs" system works. You walk your children through all their chores, being specific about your expectations and showing them what a clean bedroom, bathroom and kitchen look like. At the same time you tell them the consequences for not completing their chores such as going to bed an hour early or spending an hour alone in their bedrooms. Depending on their age, your children might need help with some of these tasks, such as bathing or making their beds. However, your goal is to help your children be self-sufficient so they're able to do these tasks without your help.

These chores should be done every morning without reminders from you. I can hear you saying, "This is impossible." But believe me when I say that hundreds of children accomplish these tasks every day.

Just a half-hour a day. All these chores can be completed in 30 to 45 minutes. In the bedroom, children can make their beds, put clean clothes in closets and dresser drawers, place dirty clothes in the hamper or down the laundry chute, empty the wastepaper basket and put toys where they belong. In the bathroom, children brush their teeth, take showers or baths, and comb their hair. They should also clean the toothpaste out of the sink, wipe up any water spills and hang their towels up to dry.

At breakfast time, children can make their own breakfast. After all, how much work is it to pour cereal and milk into a bowl or make a piece of toast. For smaller children, adjustments might need to be made, like putting milk into a small container so it won't spill. After eating, children should put their dishes in the dishwasher or kitchen sink and put away unused food. Older children can even be expected to wash their own dishes.

Finally, children should be responsible for packing their own backpacks with things they'll need at school, like books, show and tell items, homework or other supplies.

Every morning before the children leave for school one parent checks out the bathroom, bedroom and kitchen. Even if every chore is completed and everything is picked up except for one red Lego in the middle of the bedroom floor, your child has failed to complete the "4Bs" satisfactorily.

You need to be consistent. Stick by the rules or the system will fall apart. When you're lenient and let something as small as a Lego go by, I guarantee that children will continue to test the limits. The next day there'll be two Legos on the floor, the day after that two Legos and a crayon, with the mess increasing each day.

You're doing your children a favor by insisting they learn how to complete their chores satisfactorily or suffer the natural consequences if they don't. When children grow up and go to work, their bosses are not going to accept late, half-done projects, so it's good for children to learn how to follow rules.

You can start working with your children when they're as young as two years old to help them get into the habit of being responsible. Young children can put away their own toys and do other small chores around the house.

When you set specific tasks for children to do and consequences for failure to complete those jobs, then chores are not such a chore.

Here's more you can do:

- Do family chores together, such as cleaning out the garage or raking leaves.
- Make sure the assigned chores are appropriate for your children's ages and can be accomplished successfully.
- For some chores, accept the best job your children can do even if it's not up to your standards.
- Be patient as your children develop the skills to perform more complex chores.