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The Gender Chore Wars

By CWK Network Producer

“What we’re talking about is a cumulative effect - and a cumulative or an accumulation of one message after another - that first begins with parents and then continues with peers, teachers, media, etcetera, etcetera.”

-Patti Owen-Smith, Ph.D., Psychologist

A new survey by Highlights magazine of kids ages five to 12 finds that 73 percent of girls have assigned chores at home, compared to just 65 percent of boys. In fact, one study found that boys spend more time playing outside than doing chores while for girls, it’s just the opposite.

“Go ahead and take the garbage out, Stephen,” says Sharon Grove, mother of three.

In this house, Stephen takes out the trash and cares for the dog - while daughters Laura and Megan wash the dishes, set the table and do the laundry.

But do their parents assign chores based on gender?

“Hmm, I haven’t really thought about it,” says Grove. “Maybe with Stephen taking out the garbage, that just seems to be something that he can just grab and take - and doesn’t mind if he gets garbage on himself.”

Researchers from the University of Michigan found in many families boys mow the lawn and take out the trash while girls cook and clean.

On top of that, another survey finds that girls are often assigned more chores than boys.

Still, is it terrible to make boys take out the trash, for example, and to have girls clean the kitchen?

“Of course not,” says Dr. Patti Owen-Smith, a psychologist at Emory University. “What we’re talking about is a cumulative effect - and a cumulative or an accumulation of one message after another - that first begins with parents and then continues with peers, teachers, media, etcetera, etcetera.”

She says that message can be a narrow “box”, defining what boys and girls can do – and, more importantly, what they cannot. It’s limiting, she says - and when it comes to chores, there’s a better way.

“I think parents should listen to their children, and let their children take the lead in terms of choices of activities,” says Owen-Smith.

Stephen says he doesn’t want to wash the dishes, but his sisters could probably manage his chores.

“Girls can take out the trash and get the mail, bring the dog out,” he says. “It’s not that hard.”

Gender Differences and Emotional Health

By CWK Network, Inc.

Boys and girls deal with emotions differently. When girls aren’t invited to parties or dances- they dwell on it. Boys move on and forget about it quickly. A recent study of fourth and fifth grade boys and girls, ages 9 to 12, found that girls tend to think about their feelings more, while boys find things to take their mind off their emotions. Experts say this difference in dealing with unpleasant emotions may put women at a greater risk for developing depression later in life.

One reason for this gender difference may be social expectations. Often society plays a role in the way girls and boys express themselves. Girls are expected to cry and discuss their feelings and emotions. Boys are expected to suppress them, holding them in.

Currently, depression affects four percent of all teenagers, with girls seven times more likely to be depressed and twice as likely to attempt suicide, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Consider these additional statistics regarding girls' mental health and substance abuse:

- Girls are three times more likely than boys to have a negative body image (often reflected in eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia)
- One in five girls in the U.S. between the ages of 12 and 17 drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes
- Girls who develop positive interpersonal and social skills decrease their risk of substance abuse

Despite the fact that girls are more likely to suffer from depression, boys are at risk as well. Just because most boys tend to hold back their emotions doesn't mean they aren't affected. When both boys and girls are considered, statistics from the National Mental Health Association show:

- One in five children has a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorder. Up to one in 10 may suffer from a serious emotional disturbance. Seventy percent of children do not receive mental health services.
- Up to one in every 33 children and one in eight adolescents may have depression
- Once a child experiences an episode of depression, he or she is at risk of having another episode within the next five years
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds and the sixth leading cause of death for 5- to 14-year-olds. The number of attempted suicides is even higher.

What Parents Need to Know

To help your child remain emotionally healthy, it is important that parents are aware of the following that may indicate emotional problems:

- Refusal to return to school and "clinging" behavior, including shadowing the mother or father around the house
- Sleep disturbances, such as nightmares or not wanting to go to sleep at all
- Loss of concentration and irritability
- Behavior problems, including misbehaving in school or at home in atypical ways
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) with unknown physical causes
- Withdrawal from family and friends, listlessness, decreased activity

If you notice any of these signs, discuss them with your child. Having this conversation can be extremely difficult, especially as children grow older, but it is never too late to open the lines of communication. Experts say all children, even teenagers, want to talk and discuss their feelings and problems with their parents, but children are unlikely to initiate this conversation. To talk to your children about their emotions, consider these guidelines provided by the Mental Health Association of Westchester:

- **Begin early** - Show your children you are willing to talk about difficult and awkward subjects. If you are unsure how to respond when your child asks a question, it is okay to say that the subject is important enough to discuss after you give it some thought. Be sure that you do. Otherwise, the message is that your child's concern was not important enough to you to remember and discuss.
- **Keep the conversation at your child's level** - When children ask questions, we may overestimate how much they actually understand. Ask what their ideas are and what they have heard. Fit your answers to their level of understanding. Provide as much information as children need to satisfy them. Follow their cues as to when they've had enough discussion.
- **Be honest** - Children can accept things told to them honestly and straightforwardly at their own level of understanding. Be honest to develop credibility with your child. Of course, it is all right to acknowledge that a topic is difficult, sad, or awkward for you to talk about.
- **Start the conversation** - If there is something you feel should be discussed, feel free to raise it. Especially as children reach the pre-teen and teen years, they may be reluctant to talk about their own experiences or ideas. A natural lead-in may come from discussing a television show that you have watched together, from listening to lyrics of their music, after hearing a news report, or following a classroom discussion. You can also begin a discussion by asking what students in their school or their friends think about an issue. Perhaps you can ask them to imagine how they would feel or what they would do in a particular situation.
- **Listen, don't lecture** - The best way to encourage conversation is to really listen and hear what children say. If you anticipate what they will say, finish their sentences, or use this as an opportunity to lecture, chances are you will close off discussion. Expect that you will disagree about some things but try to listen to their point of view.
- **Really listen** - Of course sometimes you will be talking while doing something else. Sometimes that helps to reduce the intensity of a discussion and is useful as long as you are not too distracted from listening. But at other times, children feel their concerns and interests are not taken seriously enough. Be sure to spend time when the child is the main focus. These times often lead to good discussions.

- **Share your values** - Parents are the most important sources of information for children and for their developing values and goals. Begin early, before children are also receiving information and values from others and from media.
- **Be available** - Children do not seek out adults when it is convenient for us. They want adults to be available when they are inclined to talk. The more you are available, for example, by spending after-school or evening hours in a common area of your home, the greater the likelihood that your child will seek you out.
- **Be patient** - Children may take a while to get to the main point. They may want to discuss an issue over and over. Each time you have a discussion it will probably be with a greater level of understanding and maturity on your child's part. They will be able to handle more information and more complicated discussions of your values and beliefs. Be willing to have the conversations over and over. Be consistent in your ideas.

Resources

- [Children's National Medical Center](#)
- [Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology](#)
- [The Mental Health Association of Westchester](#)
- [Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration](#)

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