

## Twenty Practical Tips for Teaching Children to Work

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*by Daryl Hoole*

Learning to do less for your children so you can do more with them is a good maxim to live by in the home. Following are a few basic principles about teaching children the work ethic and then twenty tips for practical application.

It's a parent's desire to raise up children who will be responsible, self-reliant, competent, contributing, well-adjusted adults. It's in the home where the attitudes, habits, and skills leading to these attributes are best nurtured. It's in the home where children best learn to express love by serving one another. It's in the home where children can learn to work.

It's through helping in the home that children feel “part of the team” and gain the benefits of being needed and sharing in the well-being of the household.

There's a deep, lifelong lesson that can be gleaned from taking care of property and possessions and serving people. It's called respect — respect for things, respect for others, and ultimately respect for oneself. Respect, coupled with gratitude, is the essence of being good stewards.

Furthermore, a child who learns to manage successfully his own life and his own room can more easily take care of additional rooms and lives when such responsibility comes to him.

Tips:

**Be a model, an example.** It helps if a child sees his parents doing tasks about the house and yard.

**Work with children.** Show them how to do a task; don't just tell them to do it. When clearly taught and effectively trained, and when appropriate expectations are established, children can be held to a fairly high level of performance.

**Be consistent.** There is strength in consistency. When children finally come to realize that “this is the way it is,” they accept it and their resistance and arguing diminishes. If you decide to waive a rule or policy, declare an exception; don't just let it slide.

**Instill good habits.** Children who develop good habits have already won many of life's battles. A wise parent recognizes that many tasks are more a matter of habit than time. Habits are a great force in our lives. Help children make good ones.

**Allow consequences to be the disciplinarian.** For example, if a child doesn't put away his bike before going to bed, as he has been instructed to do, being aroused from bed to go do so may help him remember next time. If a child balks about taking his turn in the kitchen

because he's "too tired" or "too busy," then he is also too tired or too busy to receive phone calls that evening or enjoy other privileges. If a child carelessly loses or breaks something, he should replace the item with his own money, or at least make a token contribution, according to his age, toward its replacement.

**Catch them doing something right and respond with praise.** For example, if a child usually forgets to hang up his coat, instead of scolding him, watch for the time he does hang it up and quickly respond with positive reinforcement. They are more motivated when we praise them for doing something right than when we scold them for doing it wrong.

**Be positive and appreciative, rather than negative and critical.** The ten-to-one ratio is a good guide — give ten compliments to your child for every one correction.

**Make work a privilege, not a punishment.** Instead of threatening, "If you don't get your chores done on time, I'll give you two more jobs to do," it's better to say, "You've been such a good worker today I'm going to let you help me cook dinner."

**Make a proper distinction between "required" and "hired" jobs.** Required jobs have to do with one's basic responsibility as a member of the household, such as making one's bed, cleaning one's room, or taking a turn clearing up after dinner. Generally speaking, no one should be paid for such tasks. Hired jobs have to do with extra work about the house and yard that a child might do for pay. Such jobs vary from family to family and according to the maturity of the child, but could include tending a younger brother or sister, washing windows, doing heavy yard work, or taking care of minor repairs.

**Be flexible.** Be considerate of children's agendas. Be careful not to foster resentment or rebellion. Teach your child respect and courtesy by considering his plans and commitments as you assign tasks. For example, "Saturday chores" do not necessarily have to be done on Saturday. If there are conflicting activities Saturday morning, many of the chores could be done anytime between Thursday and Saturday at noon.

**Give clear instruction regarding what is expected and let children enjoy the good feeling of checking items off a list as they're completed.** Posting a list or making a chart helps children see the beginning and the end of their work, which is psychologically helpful. Besides, this does away with the chance that they might get the notion that if they finish one task, parents add another one, so they dawdle and stall to avoid having to do anything else.

**Make work fun and rewarding .** Make the most of intrinsic rewards — the idea that a job well done is its own best reward. The maxim "work and then play" can bring about rewards, but guard against being a parent who teaches that "work is never done."

Games work wonders in motivating children between the ages of three and six and in

the process good habits can be formed and basic skills developed. Following are a few examples:

A child wears a puppet on his hand (a stocking or a paper bag makes a good puppet), and then the child tells the puppet to pick up the toys or clothing.

Playing “Twenty Pick-up” can work magic in a cluttered room. Everyone scurries to pick up twenty items, motivated by the advantage of seeing the beginning and an end to the task. And for the child who “keeps score,” it's fair; everyone has the same amount of work to do.

Pretend to wind a child up like a toy as he begins a task. He'll very likely come back to be rewound for the next job.

The “squirt game” is a good one for three-year olds. Mother squirts a cleaning solution on a paper towel and the child wipes off the refrigerator door, the oven door, or whatever else needs cleaning. (Disposable wipes also do the job well)

Let your child dust for dimes. Hide dimes or quarters under some of the vases and lamps throughout the house to ensure a thorough dusting. You'll know by the number of dimes if the child has “hit” all the spots.

Offer rewards for work well done, such as allowing a child to choose his seat in the car for the day, or his place at the table, or which movie to choose during TV time, or which story to read at bedtime.

**Provide incentives.** The parent might say, “When the toys are picked up and you're ready for bed, I'll read you a story.” or “When the weeds are pulled, we'll go swimming,” or “As soon as the kitchen is cleaned up, we'll watch a movie.” A caution: don't make offers unless you can follow through by providing the promised activity.

**Play music to work by.** Lively music can infuse children with energy and provide momentum as they work.

**Subscribe to the “Little Red Hen” theory.** It only makes sense that those who eat and sleep in the home should also help with the work. Everyone is a team member. Help your child appreciate and support the role of each member of the family.

**Negotiate tasks when advisable, making them fair for all concerned.** If your child needs an unscheduled ride somewhere, you might handle the request by negotiating with him by saying, “I'll drive you there, which will take about fifteen minutes round trip, if you'll give me equal time by folding these clothes and sweeping the porch.”

**Inspect the work** . What gets measured, gets done. Teach children to work thoroughly and well and then help them to finish the job by “checking off” their work and calling them back when something isn't done right. Be quick to praise when work is satisfactory.

**Make work easy for them. Set them up for success.** For example, encourage children to play with their Legos or other small toys on a sheet or large tarp. Then when the play time ends, they can just roll up the sheet along with the toys for a quick clean up.

Install low hooks, shelves, and clothes rods within easy reach of children.

Provide a sturdy, safe stool for reaching high places.

Provide them with bedspreads with plaids or stripes to facilitate getting them on the bed straight.

Post itemized checklists for cleaning various rooms such as the kitchen and bathrooms and helping with the laundry.

**Develop self-reliance.** It's important for us to teach our children to be self-reliant, which means to learn to be responsible and accountable for oneself.

**Don't Give Up.** Most parents would agree that it's easier, faster, and done better, at least at first, to do most of the tasks themselves rather than to take the time and patience to teach a child to do them. But a home should be like an apprentice shop where novices (children) learn life skills from masters (parents). Good parents should gradually work themselves out of the job.