

SFGate.com**Doing chores gives children a wake-up call to real life**

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I remind my daughters to do their chores: sweep the kitchen, take out the garbage, empty the dishwasher. They groan. Not a single one of their friends, they protest, is required to do housework. My kids' resistance to chores irritates me, but their disdain for housework downright alarms me.

Where did they get the idea that cleaning up was someone else's business? Granted, our culture's trivialization of it has made housework invisible. Most women I know hardly acknowledge the countless daily tasks they do. Eager to conquer more financially lucrative and socially rewarding terrain, they pay little attention to the domestic realm, leaving it to Martha Stewart to resurrect "the art of housekeeping," a stylized perfectionism that has nothing to do with most families' needs and resources.

It's true that my daughters never see anyone scrubbing a toilet or defrosting a fridge in sitcoms and films. But it amazes me that they remain happily oblivious to their parents' housekeeping efforts. Apparently, they assume that order and cleanliness magically occur, like dusk and dawn.

Eventually, they will discover that the opposite is true. The one constant in life is disorder and dirt. A well-kept house takes constant effort. I am not talking about scrubbing behind the faucet with a toothbrush. I mean the enterprise of making a home, the countless deeds required to clear a space for yourself and your family.

Growing up with the women's movement, I too internalized contempt for housework. I scoffed at my mother's homemaking skills even though they cushioned me as I was growing up. I vowed never to become a housewife. That was easy to do -- until I had children. Suddenly I wanted to make a home. And this required, among other things the endless repetitive, unacknowledged tasks that are housework.

Don't get me wrong -- I have no interest in resurrecting a homemaker role for my daughters or myself. But I am convinced that housework teaches everyone, including sons and daughters, important life lessons. Doing chores develops independence.

Adults who lack the skills of cooking, cleaning and organizing often founder -- and they were probably the kids whose parents waited on them. That's why every kid should have some tasks, even -- or especially -- if their parents can afford a housecleaner.

In a culture that stresses self-gratification above all else, housework is a reminder that some things just need to be done, whether we feel like it or not. Completing daily chores generates the sense of satisfaction that comes from contributing toward a greater good and counteracts self-absorption. In Japanese monasteries, soji -- clean up -- is considered an honorable way to express gratitude.

Housework reminds us to complete things instead of leaving loose ends. A dinner party isn't over when the last guest leaves but when the final dish is put into the cupboard; the camping trip does not end when the car pulls into the driveway, but when the tent is stowed in the garage and the leftover food has been put away.

It's easier to ignore our impact on the environment if we don't clean up our messes. Sorting the recycling, for example, gives us an immediate sense of our ecological "footprint." If we never dust knickknacks or wipe the mirrors, we lose sight of the fact that all objects require tending and care.

Every piece of clothing gets dirty, every trinket collects dust, even the most exquisite bouquet requires tending. Taking care of things instills a sense of limits -- how many teddy bears do you want to arrange on your bed every morning? How many T-shirts do you want to wash, fold and put away?

I find that doing routine tasks gives me moments of grounding in my otherwise hectic life. If I eat at restaurants and toss my clothes over a chair too many nights in a row, I start feeling disconnected and disoriented. Would you believe that homemaking expertise can actually be sexy? If not, just ask anyone who's been served breakfast in bed.

Unfortunately, none of these arguments in favor of housework have eliminated my kids' reluctance to do chores. I am constantly making "to do" lists -- and that's the easy part. Following through unleashes nasty arguments. To set a positive tone, I invest housework with value and respect.

I make visible the incredible range of skills that are involved in making a home: not just cleaning, washing and cooking but also hanging pictures, removing spots, extinguishing grease fires and stocking first-aid supplies.

I point out that people can build lucrative businesses by offering these services and skills. When my daughters grumble about doing their tasks, I don't engage. Instead of modeling resentment, I just do what needs to be done, so that they learn to accept housework as a non-negotiable fact of life, like weather.

To cut back on nagging, I post written reminders like "Leave No Trace" next to the kitchen sink; "Anyplace Is Your Sanctuary If You Treat It Like One" next to the bathroom mirror. I am not sure these impress the girls, but they help me hold the vision of housework as a training ground for life skills and larger values.

E-mail comments to home@sfchronicle.com.

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