

Helping Our Children Develop a Work Ethic

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Kids aren't naturally diligent or naturally lazy. A work ethic is learned behavior, and as a parent you're the one who teaches your kids to acquire it. If you're like most parents, you want your children to work hard and derive meaning and satisfaction from what they do.

Unfortunately, you may be sending them another message inadvertently. Though you may insist that your kids do their homework and help around the house, these requirements alone don't guarantee that they will grow up with a sense of accountability and a drive to achieve. As we'll see, financially intelligent parents encourage a work ethic in many different – and in sometimes surprising – ways.

A work ethic's benefits are multi-faceted. Not only does it increase the odds that kids will do well in school and later in their careers, but it fosters a sense of personal responsibility. Kids without a work ethic tend to develop into lazy, unmotivated teenagers and young adults, blaming others for their failures.

Developing a work ethic in your children is a holistic process. It's not as simple as making them pick up their toys before they can play outside or forcing them to get a job at the local fast food restaurant. To help you grasp the diversity of issues involved, answer the following questions based on the ways in which you've raised your children (or based on your beliefs about how you will raise them in the future):

- Do you give them an allowance tied to doing certain chores around the house?
- Do you encourage them to work hard at school but discourage them from getting jobs because they detract from their time to do homework?
- When you give your children a task to do, do they usually take care of it effectively and on time or sloppily and when they feel like it?
- Do you expect nothing less than straight A's and express disappointment at B's?
- If your child works hard in a class but receives a mediocre grade, do you provide him with positive or negative feedback?
- Do you feel it's more important for your child to work during the summer or spend time learning about something he's interested in?

- Do you compliment your kids for a job well done, even if it's something as simple as shoveling snow or raking leaves?
- Are you more likely to complain in front of your kids about work or to express satisfaction about your job and career?
- Would you characterize yourself as lazy and unmotivated when it comes to doing chores; do you often argue with your spouse about this subject?

Just pondering these questions gives you a sense of a work ethic's complexities and variables. Let's start by defining what a work ethic really is. We define a work ethic as the belief that we are personally accountable and responsible for what we accomplish (or fail to accomplish), coupled with the belief that what we are accomplishing is worthwhile.

As a parent it's important that you model behaviors and have conversations with your children that stress this work ethic. From the time your kids are little, you want to provide them with encouragement and support for their efforts at home, at school and at work. There are positive consequences of instilling a work ethic in your kids . . . and negative consequences from failing to do so.

Parents who aren't aware of the importance of helping their children develop a work ethic frequently take the easy way out and allow their kids to slide.

Specifically, they:

- Permit their kids to get away with not doing their chores because it's too much of a hassle to keep reminding them.
- Avoid talking to their children about their grades when they perform below their abilities in school because they don't want to get into a big fight.
- Find a summer job for their kids rather than allow them to seek work on their own.

To avoid falling into these traps, recognize the dangers of raising an overindulged child. Being overindulged isn't just for the rich. Many middle class parents are either afraid to set rules and enforce them or just aren't paying attention. They are often so focused on their own hectic lives that they don't realize that their child is shirking responsibility or not putting forth a solid effort at school. This can result in a child who is given too much and held accountable for too little. Put another way, kids with a work ethic are developmentally enabled, while overindulged children are developmentally disabled.

Let's look at some of the things psychological research has to say about overindulgence:

- Overindulgence produces kids who lack self-assertion, are more dependent, have less concern for others, and are less self-reliant (the more they are overindulged, the more they need to be overindulged). Bredehoft, D.J. et al *Perceptions Attributed to Parental Overindulgence during Childhood*. 1998, (16).
- Overindulgence is not restricted to giving kids too much. Overindulgence also consists of doing too much for them and having lax rules and no chores. Bredehoft, David et. A. *No Rules, Not Enforcing Rules, No Chores + Lots of Freedom = Overindulgence Too*. (<http://www.educarer.com/oi-structure.htm>).
- Overindulgence is a more important risk factor than peer pressure in terms of the likelihood that children will abuse alcohol and drugs. Wilmes, David. J., *Parenting for Prevention: How to Raise a Child to Say No to Alcohol and Other Drugs*, Johnson Institute (Revised Edition), 1995.

A work ethic is preventative medicine for overindulgence. To understand how this ethic serves as a preventative, let's take a brief look at a critical study undertaken by Harvard University beginning in 1939. In what is known as the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the lives of 248 Harvard students and 500 young men from working class neighborhoods in Cambridge were literally put under a microscope. They went through a battery of interviews with a psychiatrist and a social worker. The social worker then traveled throughout the country to meet their parents and secure a complete history of their infant and child development. The study tracked their lives for over 40 years. They filled out questionnaires every two years, provided records of physical exams every five years and were re-interviewed about every fifteen years. Their wives and children were also interviewed. Socioeconomically, the group was diverse. Although a third of the Harvard students came from homes in the upper 10% of both wealth and income, almost half were attending Harvard on scholarship or had to work during the academic year to support themselves. While about a third of the men's fathers were professionals, half of all of the fathers had never graduated from college. More than two-thirds of the working class families in Cambridge had been on welfare at some time. These two studies make up the longest prospective studies of physical and mental health in the world.

The results of the Harvard Study are eye-opening, especially for parents. In a 1981 article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, George Valliant, the director of the Study, reported that the single biggest predictor of adult mental health was "the capacity to work learned in childhood" – in other words, the development of a work ethic. Men who Valliant described as "competent and industrious at age 14" – men who had developed a work ethic during the Industry Stage of development –

were twice as likely to have warm relationships (both family and friendships), five times more likely to have well paying jobs and 16 times less likely to have suffered significant unemployment.

Our experience with thousands of families over the years confirms Valliant's conclusions. Time and again, we've seen the positive impact of a work ethic on children's maturity and success and the negative impact when kids lack this work ethic.

If you need any more motivation to help your child develop a work ethic, consider a 50-year study by sociologist J.S. Clausen. He found that children who learned what he called "planful competence" in early adolescence had more stable, satisfying careers and fewer mid-life crises and divorces as adults. Planful competence means being dependable, having self-confidence and using intellect to solve problems. Kids who exhibit a strong work ethic have these qualities in spades. They learn how to do things right and to think before doing. This helps them avoid the impulsive, thoughtless decisions adolescents are prone to make, and it helps them acquire an area of expertise when they're older.

We don't intend to make a work ethic sound like an exact science. Some kids develop it early and some later. Some may go through a prolonged adolescence of underachievement until a specific event catalyzes their desire for fulfilling work and meaningful success. Some may drift from job to job until they hit upon a field that is their true calling.

As a parent, you can't control these factors. What you can control, though, is how you help your children learn about jobs, school and chores. If they learn to value a work ethic, they will probably use it to achieve success and satisfaction sooner or later.

The question then becomes: How and when do you instill this ethic effectively? To answer this question, let's look at the three areas that provide parents with opportunities to teach kids to be industrious and responsible for their work: Chores, School and Jobs.

In Part One, we looked at the importance of helping our kids to develop a work ethic. We explained that there are three areas that provide parents with opportunities to teach kids to be industrious and responsible for their work: Chores, School and Jobs. In this Part, we are going to look at the role of family chores in helping our children develop a work ethic.

Family chores are opportunities for kids to learn lessons about life. Parents can use chores as ways to help their kids gain self-respect and take pride in a job well done. These are lessons that will ultimately help these kids excel in whatever career

they choose. They will learn early on that a job well done is its own reward, and that a parent's compliments and other rewards (getting to go out and play) are secondary benefits. In short, they will be autotelic – they will possess an inner drive to do well rather than be dependent on external motivation. Autotelic is a word composed of two Greek roots, *auto*, which means self and *telos*, which means goal. An autotelic activity is one we do for its own sake, because to experience it is the main goal. In other words, autotelic behavior is behavior we engage in because we enjoy it, rather than for a reward or out of fear of failure.

When we use money to motivate our children, we are creating external motivation rather than relying on their own enthusiasms and passions. As psychiatrist Ed Hallowell points out in *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, we want motivation to come from the inside and not be supplied from the outside. "You may still deal with carrots and sticks, but if the carrot and the stick come from within a person, that system will last much longer than if the motivation comes entirely from the outside." Hallowell believes that using money to motivate children is as likely to produce a depressed adult as it is to produce a materially successful one.

When your children are three or four, they are ready to handle simple tasks. No matter how long it takes them to learn to master even the simplest of chores – putting their dirty dishes next to the sink so Mommy can put them in the dishwasher or helping Daddy take the garbage out – they are starting to think of themselves as members of a family in which everyone contributes to the whole. These are the kids who are more likely to grow up and be adept at working on teams and establishing productive partnerships.

They also learn to delay gratification through doing their chores. They grasp that they can't go out and play until they clean up their rooms. John Gray, Ph.D. in *Children Are From Heaven* ranks learning to delay gratification among "essential life skills," and for good reason. Many of these kids will turn into adults who save their money for something important like buying a house or putting their own kids through college rather than purchasing the plasma television or fancy sports car they can't really afford. Being able to prioritize is a gift parents can offer their young children; you'd be surprised by how many parents don't give this gift until their children are teenagers, and by then it's more difficult to learn.

Though it's great if you can come up with interesting chores for your kids to do, mix in some mundane tasks. Everything in life isn't exciting; there are many absolutely necessary but routine chores waiting for us. Tolerating a certain amount of boredom is a life skill. Sometimes you have to sit through a boring course in school before you qualify to take an interesting one. Sometimes you have to work at a boring entry-level job to be qualified for a more challenging one.

With these concepts in mind, here are eight tips on how to make chores educational, enriching experiences:

1. Exhibit a positive attitude when you do your chores. Kids watch their parents like hawks, and they won't miss your sullen response when your spouse asks you to fix a broken doorknob or to go to the store for a gallon of milk. What you say and especially what you do sends a strong message to kids, and even a subtle response – a furrowed brow, an exasperated sigh – will encourage kids to mirror your attitude. You don't have to be phony about it and pretend you can't wait to haul the garbage cans out to the street. You can, however, avoid negative gestures that suggest chores are beneath you or something to fight about with your spouse.
2. Assign chores to various family members according to interests or convene a family meeting and let the kids participate in the decision making process. If your kids are very young and you assign the chores, try to take into consideration their natural talents. Is your daughter nurturing? Have her help feed the pets. Does your son love the outdoors? Have him help you with the gardening. When the children are a little older, have a family meeting in which you outline what needs to be done around the house. Let the kids participate in figuring out the basic chores – from doing the dishes to raking leaves to keeping the family room clean – and who should do them.
3. Do some chores alongside your kids. Family chores become a battleground when kids think their parents are foisting work off on them so they can relax. So pitch in. Communicate that chores are part of everyone's life. Raking leaves or shoveling snow with your children may seem like ordinary activities, but doing them together transforms them into something meaningful and even fun. Shared chores like these also foster a sense of teamwork.
4. Help them integrate chores into their routines. As your kids grow up, they will have other responsibilities – homework, sports, private lessons – that seem to have a higher priority than household chores. They need to practice juggling the low priority tasks with the high priority ones. When they become adults, juggling personal and professional responsibilities, little tasks and big ones, is constant. People who do it well tend to lead balanced, successful lives. Start your kids out on the right foot by teaching them that they have to allow five minutes in the morning to make their beds and clean their rooms and a half hour on weekends to do some yard work. Show them how they can create a schedule for their week on the computer or by using a calendar.

5. Share your chore expectations. Children internalize their parents' expectations; these expectations are usually more powerful than consequences. Let your kids know that you expect them to pick up after themselves; that picking up is just a given in your family. Sharing your expectations provides you with the bulletproof answer when they ask why they have to clean up their room when their friend Charlie doesn't have to: "That's the way we do things at our house."
6. Foster accountability for assigned responsibilities. In other words, you want them to feel a sense of accomplishment for doing their tasks the right way and on time; you also want them to recognize that they are responsible for the consequences if they fail to do so. One of the best ways of achieving this latter goal is by linking consequences to the nature of a given chore. If you get stuck trying to figure out how to do this, think of Johnny and his chair. Johnny, age five, was driving his parents crazy by rocking his chair back and forth at the dinner table. Meal after meal, Johnny's parents would first ask him to stop rocking and then tell him to stop. Meal after meal, Johnny kept rocking. And why not? It made him the center of attention and put him in control of what was being talked about. One night when Johnny came to dinner, his chair was missing. "Johnny," said his father, "since you can't use your chair correctly, we've had to put it away." "What am I supposed to do?" asked Johnny. "Eat standing up," replied his mother. After a day of eating breakfast, lunch and dinner standing up, Johnny got his chair back and never returned to his rocking. If Johnny's parents had threatened to take away his television watching privileges, the consequences would have been divorced from the action and would have had far less impact. Therefore, if your four year old's job is to put his toys away in the evening and he keeps forgetting, the consequences might be that he can't play with them for a few days. You might explain that if he is old enough to take the toys out of the toy box, he is old enough to put them back in before bedtime. If your 14 year old daughter keeps forgetting to empty the dishwasher after dinner, wake her up 30 minutes earlier in the morning to put the dishes away before breakfast.
7. Don't link allowances or other rewards to family chores. One of the most common mistakes parents make is paying kids for doing chores, often in the form of an allowance. Most kids will skip making their bed or taking out the trash at times, and if you punish them by withholding their allowance each time they don't do a chore, you're going to turn the allowance into a battlefield where you can never win. While you want your children to understand that a job well done receives rewards, you don't want them

thinking that they should be paid for fulfilling family responsibilities. This creates a sense of entitlement that can carry over to adult life. When you find an adult who only works for the money – and who refuses to stay one second after 5:00 p.m. because “I don’t get paid any more if I stay late” – then you’re probably looking at someone whose parents fostered this sense of entitlement. Financially intelligent parents resolve the paradox of chores and rewards in the following way. They divide chores into two categories: F (family) chores and X (extra) chores. The F group involves routine family responsibilities necessary to keep the household running smoothly, such as washing dishes, taking out the trash, making the bed and so on. The X group involves tasks that you might pay someone else to do: washing the car, mowing the lawn, babysitting a younger sibling. The X group generally requires more time and effort, and kids understand that they are being rewarded for their time and effort rather than for their routine family responsibilities.

8. Avoid constant criticism as your child learns to do chores the right way. A hyper-critical, judgmental parent who thinks she is instilling a work ethic in her children is going to have exactly the opposite effect. She’ll raise kids who resent their chores and try to get out of doing them. If they can’t get out of them, they’ll rush through their tasks and do a slipshod job or learn to procrastinate. Constant criticism makes kids feel that they’ll never do a good job, so why try. They’ll internalize the notion that they’re not good enough, and as they become older they may feel the same way about school and jobs.

Recognize that kids face a chore learning curve and that they learn at their rate, not yours. Once a chore is assigned or selected, show your child how to do it. If your child makes a mistake, don’t rant and rave. Be calm and show her again how to do it, and tell her that the next time, she’ll do it right. And when you see her doing it right later on, don’t simply accept the result as something she’s supposed to do. Praise her for doing it well. Too many parents notice when their children do something wrong; not enough notice when they do it right.

At one of our seminars, Adrienne recalled that when she was five years old, she started helping her mother separate the laundry. She loved the feelings of being helpful and competent. When she was six years old, Adrienne received a new chore: watering the plants in the window boxes on the patio. The first time she watered them, the hose was on too high and mud and water splattered on the windows. Instead of showing her how to adjust the water pressure, Adrienne’s mother yelled, “Can’t you do the simplest thing right?” Adrienne said that she hated family chores from that day forward.

Be aware that constant criticism from an older sibling can also do damage. Some rivalry and teasing among siblings is normal. An older brother or sister who is constantly criticizing the way a younger sibling is doing his chores, however, can devastate the younger child. Take the older one aside and ask how he would feel if the roles were reversed and he was the recipient of constant criticism from an older sibling. Most of the time, this is enough. If it isn't, you may simply have to monitor the situation and intervene when the older sibling is being hypercritical.

Schoolwork and extracurricular activities are two of the three basic building blocks that help your children develop a work ethic. The other is family chores. When it comes to schoolwork, let's start off with a surprising truth: Pressuring your children to get straight A's does not develop a work ethic. It may increase their stress to off-the-chart levels, but it won't help them gain satisfaction from achievement or become self-motivated. Elisabeth Gurthrie and Kathy Matthews, authors of *The Trouble With Perfect*, note that children need to take chances and possibly fail if they are going to develop a strong sense of self. When parents turn up the pressure on grades, they encourage their children to play it safe in order to achieve a highly ambitious goal. As a result, they're not willing to write a paper on a topic that really turns them on; they'll choose a topic that they think will turn the teacher on. When kids are obsessive about achieving perfect grades, they not only are less willing to take risks, but they're less creative and spontaneous than other children.

Pushing kids too much is a universal problem. An editorial in the Korea Times discusses how graduates of Seoul University burn out from the intense pressure to achieve at school. The editorial writer advises parents not to "force your children to study too much too fast. Let them go at their own pace. Nobody pushed Einstein, and he turned out all right."

While you want to encourage your kids to work hard at school, your focus should be on motivating them to do their best rather than be the best. Consider the following pairs of be-the-best (B) and do-your-best (D) parental advice:

B: I know math isn't your top subject, but if you study an extra hour each night, you can get an A.

D: I know math isn't your top subject, but pay attention in class, ask questions if you don't understand, do all the homework, and you'll be fine.

B: You're not going to get into one of the elite colleges unless you quit spending all your time playing music and focus exclusively on your school work.

D: You need to find a balance between playing music and doing your homework.

B: We're spending a lot of money sending you to private school, so we expect your grades to demonstrate you're grateful for this opportunity.

D: We hope you'll take advantage of the opportunities to enroll in classes and do the type of projects that are unavailable at public school.

B: It's good that you received a 97 on your fifth grade English test, but with a little more effort, you could have received 100.

D: 97 is a terrific score; tell us what you wrote about.

B: To be the top student in Mrs. Jones' class, you need to talk to her, figure out what she's looking for, and give it to her.

D: If Mrs. Jones' expects you to do projects a certain way but you feel strongly that there's a better way to do it, that's okay with us but we suggest that you talk to her about your plans.

Beyond distinguishing between these two types of advice in your school-related discussions, you can do a number of other things to facilitate a work ethic.

Specifically:

- Communicate through your actions that you believe it's important to make a solid effort at school. It's not just saying that you believe it's important, but taking actions that reinforce what you say. To that end, make sure you create a quiet environment for your child to do his homework – set rules regarding interruptions such as phone calls and online communication. You should also provide your child with resources for doing well at school – dictionaries, encyclopedias, online access for research purposes. Attend school open houses, parent-teacher conferences and your child's school-related activities (sports, plays, music).
- Involve yourself (as opposed to just observing) in her school work. This doesn't mean do the work for her, hover over her while she does homework or correct every mistake on every paper she brings home. It does mean making yourself available when she asks for your help. Assist with drills and help her learn to prioritize assignments. Don't just talk about homework but also ask if graded papers or projects were handed back, what tests and class projects are coming up and so on. Double check with the teachers on a periodic basis to make sure that your child is handing in all homework and what grades have been handed back recently. Some parents believe that their children don't want them involved in the school process. Don't believe it! Jacquelynne Eccles, a Professor of Psychology at the School of Education of the University of Michigan, has studied programs designed to foster parental involvement in their children's schools. Her research discloses that children want their parents to be involved.
- Initiate conversations about school-related ideas. Too often, parent-child discussions about school revolve around grades. Instead, focus on ideas

raised in school. Talk about the subject of an essay your child wrote; or what motivated him to do a particular drawing; or his feeling that he should be allowed to do an assignment his way. Your willingness to listen to him as well as respond with your own ideas will demonstrate that you admire the passion and energy he brings to his school work.

- Encourage them to participate in extracurricular activities that excite them. Some kids aren't particularly excited by their academic classes but exhibit great interest and aptitude in other areas: music, art, computers, sports, ecology clubs and so on. Developing a work ethic around subjects that truly interest and involve kids is important. Certainly, they also need to learn how to work diligently when subjects aren't interesting (such as mundane chores), but extracurricular activities offer an avenue to work hard at and take pride in something they relish. When they do participate, be careful not to dismiss or devalue their efforts. Don't say things like, "I'm glad you enjoy band, but you're probably not going to make your living as a musician, so get your priorities straight." Even if your child doesn't become a musician, his experiences in band will show him how hard work pays off in greater proficiency at an instrument, and he'll take pride in his accomplishments. This is what a work ethic is all about.