

Work, Chores, and Play: Setting a Healthy Balance

by David Elkind

I had my first job when I was nine years old at the end of the Depression. To get some spending money, I asked the owner of a corner Mom and Pop grocery store if he needed anyone to stack the returned empty glass soda bottles into the wooden boxes in which they were transported. He took me on; and after school and on Saturdays, (most stores were closed on Sundays) I worked putting the bottles into boxes and doing other simple chores. I earned 50 cents a week and spent it at the store on comic books, candy, soda, and potato chips. I never knew what an allowance was, and I worked to get a few childhood treats my parents could not afford. Fortunately, even during the Depression Era, my father had a job, foreman at a machine shop. Even so, we were still a blue collar family and you had to work, if you wanted anything more than the necessities.

I start with this recollection because it illustrates a central point about children's work, chores, and allowance, namely, social context. In many countries today, child labor is still all too common a practice. In my case, I grew up in the Depression era at a time when both jobs and money were scarce. My own children were more fortunate. They grew up in the post WWII affluent period and did get an allowance. The allowance was not a payment for their expected chores — like taking out the garbage. They were only paid for special jobs like washing the car. We also encouraged them to start bank accounts, where they could put money given to them as gifts or that they were paid for doing extra chores. Starting a savings account is a helpful way to get children to think about money in a long term way.

Social context also determines our sex role expectations about what is appropriate male and female work. When I was growing up there were rigid sex roles, particularly in immigrant families like my own. Although I worked outside the

house, I was never expected to wash dishes, make beds, or sweep the floor. Such chores were women's work and were left for my mother and sisters to perform. I was only asked to take out the garbage, bring in the milk, and carry out the ashes from our coal furnace. We live in a quite different era today. My sons play a much larger role in child care and household maintenance than I ever did. Nonetheless, I expect that my granddaughters (we don't have grandsons — so far anyway) will still be asked to do more of the household chores, like washing the dishes or preparing a meal, than if they were boys.

Sex role stereotypes die hard. We are still more willing to ask girls to do routine household chores, than we are to ask boys to engage in the same activities. The results are evident in the research with two parent working families. In such families women still do the bulk of the housework and childrearing (Hochschild, 1998). Interestingly, even in two parent working families, girls are still often expected to do more of the washing and cleaning than is expected of boys.

There are also ethnic differences in sex role expectations relating to what are regarded as appropriate children's chores. I once ran a school for what I called "curriculum disabled children." These were children of average or better ability who simply had learning styles that were not accommodated by the standardized curricula. I had my undergraduates, as part of a course, do one-to-one tutoring of these children. We usually got them back to grade level after a year



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or two. One afternoon during lunch, a young man knocked over his glass of milk, and the teacher asked him to get a paper towel and clean it up. He refused. She insisted and with great reluctance and signs of embarrassment he made a swipe or two at the spill. The next day his father came into my office, upset and angry. He was Turkish, and gave me to understand that in his country men did not clean up, that was women's work and it was demeaning for his son to be made to do it. I apologized and said that in the future if something like that happened we would find another way to deal with it. And we did. The next time he spilled something, he made a bargain with a female student to help her with her homework if she did the cleaning.

Age is another factor that has to go into the child work/chore equation. Preschool children love to participate in activities like setting the table, fetching things (like Daddy's paper), feeding the dog. Engaging in these activities gives the young child a sense of being grown up and being a useful member of the family. That is why it is so important to give young children the opportunity to participate, at their level of ability, in family chores. With school-age children, particularly after the age of eight, it is a somewhat different story. At this age children's friends become as important as the family, and children often want to spend their free time with friends rather than help around the house. The need for peer acceptance becomes as, or more, powerful than the need for parental acceptance.

With this age group it is often useful to sit down and jointly set up a set of guidelines for who is to do what, and when. The underlying rule is that, in a family, everyone has to be responsible for at least a few of the routine household chores. It often helps if parents arrange to do at least some of the chores, like changing sheets and folding the laundry, together. Children are more likely to help in these tasks if one parent, or both, works with them. When we do jobs in this joint way, it is not like we are the boss and they are the workers. Rather we are co-workers, in it together. Doing chores together also provides an important opportunity to talk. In setting up the rules as to who does what, it is important to write them down and post them prominently, so no one can use the excuse, "I forgot." In addition it is also useful to jointly set up the penalties for chores that are neglected or left undone. Children are more willing to accept penalties if they have participated in setting them up.

As for allowances for this age group, I think that should be a separate issue from household responsibilities. As a member

of the household, each child has some responsibility for keeping it in working order, namely, neat and clean. Children can load the dishwasher and put dishes away, they can take out the garbage and they can sweep the floor. They can put their dirty clothes in the hamper and put their toys and games away. These are responsibilities inherent in living together, and not something extra that children should be paid for. An allowance, on the other hand, should be based on the recognition that children do not work, and that they do need money for lunches and for incidentals when they are with their friends. Again, the amount of the allowance should be negotiated in a discussion about what is needed and what is reasonable.

All of this is to say that there are no hard and fast rules about children doing household chores and working. In some two parent, and single parent, working families, children take on a lot of family responsibilities from an early age, including meal preparation, laundry, and even child care. As long as these children are not overburdened and have time for themselves, these activities can be rewarding. The young person can feel that he or she is important, needed, and contributing to the welfare of the family. In other families, children may be very busy with a variety of after school programs which leaves them little time or energy to do household chores. In these families, parents may be unwilling to further limit the child's free time by burdening him or her with household responsibilities.

So, in the abstract, one could say that household chores are a good thing. As a practical matter, however, many different considerations determine how many, and what family chores children should be asked to undertake. Each family is different and there is no simple formula for every set of parents and children. At the same time it is also true that as members of the family, children should understand that they bear some responsibility for the upkeep of the household. How many, and what kind of responsibilities will depend upon each particular family's circumstances. The same is true for allowances. Allowance, however, should be separate from family chores for which children should not be paid — any more than the parents are for doing the same work.

So far, I have only talked about work and chores, not about play. Play has to be entered into the equation because work and chores should not take away from play time. For young children and school-age children, play is a powerful mode of learning. Young children learn a great deal about the natural world through their playful explorations of the immediate

world about them. School-age children learn much about social behavior and themselves through play and through self-initiated games with rules. In today's world, however, the meaning of play has been confounded by the electronic environment in which we all live. Micro-chip embedded toys, television, video games, and computers all compete for the child's time as do organized team sports. Although many of these activities are promoted as educational, their pedagogical value has yet to be proven. We have had *Sesame Street* for more than 30 years, and reading and math scores have not shown significant improvement over that time period.

I think we have to admit that many of these activities are more entertainment than they are play or academic learning. The difference has to do with how much participation from the child is demanded by the activity. In play and academic learning there is considerable participation from the child in playing with the toy, watching a program or playing self-initiated games. Entertainment, in contrast, demands little of the child other than passive receptivity. Watching television,

playing team sports and video games are not truly play because they require little active participation from the child. The child is only a spectator when watching television and does not make or break the rules when playing organized sports. Even video games teach little more than elementary perceptual/motor skills. The real challenge for parents is to recognize that many toys and games that are promoted as play, or as educational, are, in fact, entertainment. And the difficult task for parents is to ensure that children spend as much or more time on chores, homework, and self-initiated individual and group play, than on being entertained. That is the ratio for adults, and it is a healthy pattern for children to acquire, and to acquire early.

Reference

Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1998). *The Second Shift*. New York: Penguin Books.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

What's your story?: Elkind shares his childhood experiences related to chores, work, and play. Divide teachers into groups of three and ask them to share their chores, work, and play stories with each other. After they do, facilitate a summary discussion about how stories were similar, different, and unique.

Follow the lead: Sit down with children to identify chores that need to be completed to keep the classroom running smoothly. Then, set up guidelines for who might do what, when, and how the chores will be assigned. Try it out, then review and modify based on children's input.

Do it together: Follow Elkind's wonderful suggestion to do chores with children to create opportunities to talk, be close, and work together to get things done.

Play, work, or entertainment?: Gather a collection of classroom toys and materials to divide into groups based on Elkind's discussion of entertainment versus play or work. Sort them into the categories PLAY, WORK, or ENTERTAINMENT, then discuss the balance — is there the right amount in each category? Consider the implications of your findings.