

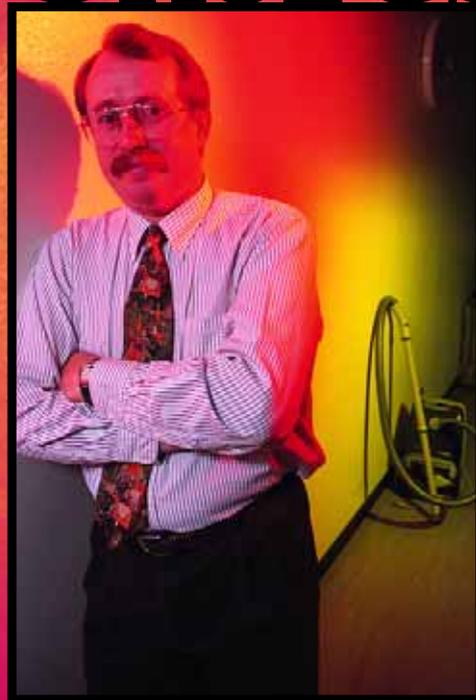
Are there good reasons why parents should assign their children household chores? You bet there are! ASU sociologist Sampson Lee Blair did the research to tell you why. BY LYNETTE SUMMERILL

THE MULTIPLE LAYERS OF CLUTTER ACCUMULATED SEEMINGLY OVERNIGHT. They were the last straw for Virginia, a Phoenix data entry clerk.

# The Chore of Chores

“Clean that pigsty of a room. Right now!”

Virginia shouted to her teenage daughter as she peered through the bedroom door after a long day of work. The daughter, sitting crossed-legged on the floor, looked up from her math homework with a shocked but otherwise disgusted glare. The nightly conflict had begun at its usual time, precisely 6:05 p.m.



John C. Phillips photo

**T**HE SCENARIO IS ALL TOO COMMON for anyone who has repeatedly battled with their children over household chores. What is the “magic formula” to get children to clean their rooms, help with the laundry, cook, wash dishes, or do any number of the daily tasks that keep homes up and running? Dismayed parents often wonder where they went wrong.

“I remember when I was her age,” says a bewildered Virginia, referring to Terri, her 15-year-old daughter. “I had twice as much work to do around the house. I wouldn’t have dreamed of blowing off the responsibility. Kids today have it too easy.”

According to the results of a survey conducted for the Soap and Detergent Association, 25 percent of responding parents admitted that they constantly nag their children about cleaning their room. Other

tasks, such as picking up dirty clothes, returning soiled dishes to the sink, or hanging up wet towels were cause for concern among parents.

The truth is, today’s kids may be contributing more than parents are giving them credit for, says Sampson Lee Blair, a family sociologist at Arizona State University. His research found that children ages 6 to 18 contribute 12 percent of all household labor.

**“Parents realize there are certain things that have to get done.”**

**They rely on the children to take up the slack.”**

“The amount of work that children contribute to the family is essential,” says Blair. “As an employer, could you imagine losing 12 percent of your workforce? It would be devastating.”

Blair found that nine out of 10 American kids contribute to the household chores at some level. The ASU scientist studied 2,910 black, Hispanic, and white families to determine if parental and family structure played a role in children’s willingness to pitch in and clean up.

Blair has studied family dynamics for a decade. He looks at specific roles within family structure and at how families divvy-up household chores. His findings are interesting.

For example, Blair found that minority children perform more overall household labor than their white counterparts, and specifically, more of the traditional chores. “Previous studies have noted the differences in adults’ performance in household tasks by ethnicity. But few had considered how cultural differences might affect children’s participation in traditional chores,” Blair explains. “Differences in adult behavior across ethnic groups can logically be traced back to some of the different expectations and responsibilities placed on them as children.”

Blair’s study is based on data from the 1993 National Survey of Families and Households, a cross-sectional national sample of 10,008 respondents. He narrowed that data to 2,910 households that contained at least one parent and one child between the ages of 6 and 18.

After identifying households that provided complete responses to the child labor variables, Blair chose 527 black families, 214 Hispanic families and 2,169 white families to study. He reported his findings last year during meetings of the American Sociological Association in Washington, D.C.

“I found that black and Hispanic children are more likely to do a greater share of the housework when mothers and fathers work longer than a 40-hour workweek. The same effects were evident among white children, yet the relative strength of the associations were weaker,” Blair said.

Blair also found that the amount of household chores performed weekly by children in the three ethnic groups directly corresponds with the amount of housework done by their mothers, but not with the housework done by their fathers. The more housework performed by mothers, the more housework performed by the children. Blair found that this linkage between mother’s and children’s housework was strongest among blacks and weakest among whites.

“Children’s time spent doing household chores is primarily associated with what mothers are doing in the home (housework) and what fathers are doing outside the home (hours of employment),” he explains. “The differences in these effects across ethnic groups illustrates how parental role models and parenting styles in general can vary by ethnicity.”

There are several explanations as to why children have historically performed household labor. Prior to the 20th century, American children were viewed as a viable resource for families, particularly as paid or unpaid laborers. “During the Industrial Revolution, it was not uncommon for rural children to be used extensively as workers on family farms and for urban children to be employed in textile mills and coal mines,” says Blair. “This utility was not overlooked by parents, rather it was recognized and maximized by the parents.”

Things changed during the 1930s and 1940s with the introduction of child labor laws and the changing conception of children’s value within the family structure. Blair says the status of children became sentimentalized. Offspring became less of an economic asset to parents and more “emotionally priceless.” During the last half-century, the “priceless child image” has contributed to parents looking upon their children’s assistance in household labor as an essential part of their development.

There are several good reasons why parents should assign their children household tasks, Blair continues. A total of 72 percent of parents surveyed said that contributing to the family is beneficial. Adolescents learn to assume responsibility, gain autonomy, and get practical life skills, including decision-making, before they reach adulthood.

However, Blair thinks that most contemporary parents are not necessarily as concerned with teaching these developmental skills as they are with the pragmatic aspect. “Parents realize there are certain things that have to get done. They rely on the children to take up the slack,” he says.

Blair’s findings indicate that children’s participation in home chores depends on pragmatic family traits, such as size and composition. Children whose mothers are employed part-time outside the home may perform the least amount of chores, while children of single parent households typically perform the most. Traditionally, daughters are expected to, and do, perform more household chores than sons do.

“Children usually begin helping around the home at about age six,” says Blair. At first, the chores are relatively simple, such as helping to pick up toys and emptying the trash. By age 10, increased cognitive development allows children to expand their work repertoire. Some begin to use equipment such as a lawn mower, washing machine, or stove. This is known as task complexity. The older the child becomes, the more complex the task he or she is able to accomplish.

“Task complexity drives parents crazy,” says Blair, who is the father of two daughters. In theory, by age 16, teens should be handling more tasks than their younger siblings. However, studies show the amount of household chores completed by 16- to 18-year-olds declines sharply.

Blair says that kids are faced with many of the same predicaments that adults encounter in modern society, including complex schedules, complete with too much stress and too little time. Educational requirements are tougher for kids today than those just two decades ago, says Blair. Add dating and social activities to the mix, extra-curricular activities and part-time jobs outside the home, and today’s teens often have a full plate.

“Kids today aren’t out plowing fields like their Colonial-era counterparts, but that doesn’t mean they have become lazy either,” says Blair. “American youth display a strong work ethic. This is reflected not only in the amount of work they do in the home, but also in the record number of American teens who are employed outside the home.”

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