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.

"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.
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 caregivers. “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.”

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After identifying households that provided complete responses to the child labor variables, Blair chose 737 black families, 74 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. He 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 work...done by their mothers. The more housework performed by mothers, the more household chores performed by the children. Blair found that this...among black and weakest among whites.

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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 precious.” 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 16, 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. “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.”