

From Chores to Character

Your children are lazy and need to learn to enjoy work. Now is a great time to teach them.

“Why?”

I’m glad you asked.

We could start all the way back. If no one worked... but you can figure that out yourself.

Let’s be more superficial.

I don’t know exactly when it happened, but I eventually learned to enjoy work. That was a real gift. As my grandfather taught me, “You don’t have to if you want to.”

I’ve worked throughout most of my life. It’s been intermittent, but still, it’s been a long time and plenty of hours. Moving from drudgery to enjoyment is a huge improvement. Work is practically unavoidable after all. And all it took was a simple mind change.

Since enjoying work is such a huge improvement and simple to do, you should teach it to your children.

“How?”

Well, that’s a difficult question. And I’m not sure I have all the answers.

I know that many fundamentals must be in place if you expect to make any progress in this field. Love, respect, routines, and boundaries are all prerequisites. If a child isn’t sure that you love them, then you become an adversarial dictator through the process. If they don’t respect you, they won’t obey you and that means work won’t happen.

If routines and boundaries aren’t in place, they won’t have the confidence they need to take up new responsibilities.

The first law of “how” is demonstration. You cannot teach them something you are not able to demonstrate. When they see you relishing your work, they will want to work with you.

This introduces an odd dynamic that I find in parenting. I love my children, and I want them to learn to work, but I would often rather do the work myself while they play. I hope this isn’t the case for you, but I find that children actually slow my work and many times they can’t match the quality that I’ve come to expect. And so, it’s tempting to send them to their toys while I finish the chores.

But that’s not fair to them. They want to be with you. They want to experience the joy that comes from a job well done. So the norm should be that you actively look for ways to incorporate them into your work. Ask them to fetch things. Think ahead to a project that they could prepare for. Look out for simple tasks that they could supplement. It might even be the “fun” part of the project that you were anticipating. And, of course, talk to them as you work together. Notice God in everyday life and teach them His principles of right and wrong.

Call them to new heights but never ask too much of them. This is a tightrope. I've gotten this one wrong plenty of times. When I ask too much of my children, the task is impossible and my orders frustrate them. But the joy of work comes from accomplishment, so introducing them to new tasks as they develop is important.

Several centuries ago, work was more closely tied to survival. Parents could not afford to raise idle children. Toys were scarce. Menial chores were plentiful. Water had to be carried, butter churned, chickens fed, firewood gathered, and food prepared.

These days, you might need to go out of your way to provide regular chores for your children. You might need a few acres so that you can plant a garden, build a chicken coop, and raise a few dogs. Perhaps you can start a home business that allows the children to help. Perhaps you will let the dishwasher rest so that children can learn to wash the dishes by hand.

My mom let me hang out the wash, feed the chickens, sweep the porch, clean the bathrooms, vacuum the floors, bake bread, weed the garden, pick the produce, milk the cow, bring the wash in and fold it and put it away, gather pecans, sift peanut hulls, pick blueberries and muscadines, mulch flowerbeds, and, of course, do my home-work. To be clear, Mom did most of the work. But she knew how to get us involved. Dad refused to buy a riding mower. He had too many boys that needed to learn to sweat with a push mower.

You need to show your children how to do a job a couple of times before they will be able to master it themselves. And once they have mastered it, you will still need to check in with them periodically to make sure that they completed the task and did the job well. If you find that they grew careless, frustration will not help. Patient repetition goes a long way toward a successful child.

To my chagrin, my children don't usually work under "inspiration." Even though I hope that my leadership will rub off on them, I still find that it takes a firm hand to get them to work. There are two tools that every parent must use in these cases: the carrot and the stick.

Somewhere in my childhood, I saw a drawing of a farmer using all his tools to convince his donkey to take him to town. With one hand he dangles a carrot just in front of the poor donkey's nose and with the other he uses a stick to beat the donkey when he slows. It displays exaggerated imagery, of course, but illustrates timeless principles which are the primary means for teaching children to work.

But I want to teach my children more than simply to work. I want them to enjoy it.

Right now that seems like a tall order.

My hope is that if I provide a consistent foundation of love, respect, and leadership, the joy of work will come later. My children may not see it now, but I intend to lay the groundwork so that when they are adults, they see the work, willingly pitch in, and find the purpose and joy that comes from a job well done.

~Caleb Martin