

Ep #165: The Complex World of Parenting and Chores



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host
Lisa Smith

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Welcome to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*, a podcast for parents that are tired of yelling, threatening, and punishing their kids. Join mom and master certified parent coach Lisa Smith as she gives you actionable step-by-step strategies that'll help you transform your household from chaos to cooperation. Let's dive in.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Welcome to today's episode. Now listen, I know that parenting can often feel like a juggling act, especially when it comes to managing household chores and 2024 right alongside the demands of work and raising kids.

I recently had a parent asked me when do you start, Lisa, having children do chores? She admitted that she feels really overwhelmed working a full time job, keeping up with all the housework, and raising three little kids. So she admitted she often feels the need to ask or, if she's honest demand, on the spot help from her kids that they pitch in and do their part.

When the kids who are little push back, she often feels defeated, and then tells herself they're never going to help. They don't want to help. They don't help well. So it's just easier to do the chores myself. Which then leads her to feeling more and more exhausted, overwhelmed, dysregulated and triggered when around her kids.

Sound familiar? Are you like, whoa, that's me. I didn't even write into Lisa. I get it. I get it. So to answer a question, honestly, there's no rule about the timing of introducing kids to chores. There's no magical age. There's no right way to do it. You don't have to do it. It isn't required. There isn't some magical moment where they're capable of doing things.

It's very dependent on the emotional development of your kids, dependent on their interests, the size of your family, the amount of work that needs to be done. A family of four, has more of a need to have the children do chores than maybe just a family of one. A single parent might have more of a need for the two kids to pitch in and tidy up after themselves than when

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two parents live in the same home. There's no right or wrong answer. There's really not.

The truth is the chores can be activated at any point. It isn't like there's a window. If chores don't get added to the list of childhood development milestones by the age eight, then your child will never do them, or they'll be lazy, or they won't be self-sufficient. There's no window.

The other thing is it's okay to ask your oldest to do a chore and not ask the younger kids to do it. Or ask them to all do a chore together. Again, there is no data that says that activating chores at a certain age or by a certain age or certain chores produces kids that are, quote, more productive or more successful. There's no data that speaks to that.

Now, if your oldest was looking for some autonomy, or maybe he or she is looking to earn some money and is looking to be differentiated from the younger kids, a chore could be the way to get it done. Maybe your oldest is looking to feel autonomous from their sibling. Chores might be a great way to go.

Here's the thing about chores. Now, I know some of you aren't going to want to hear this but it's 100% true. Here's the 411. Kids are not just going to do them automatically. They're not going to do them upon command, especially if they're little. There has to be an incentive. To get them really engaged, there has to be something they're going to get out of it. Most kids don't find working F-U-N.

Now some do. Remember, kids are hardwired for two things, capital F, capital U, capital N, and to get their needs met. If you have a kid that loves playing mommy and doing mommy things, like getting the baby's diaper or cleaning up the toys, they find that fun. You find a way to make cleaning up the toys fun or a game or a contest then take advantage of that. Use that in your favor.

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But if your kids don't find F-U-N in helping, then you may want to use some other way to engage them in the chores to make the chores fun. Because kids, especially when they're little, are not hardwired for work. They're hardwired for fun. So have a dance party. Put the music on and dust together, or say we're all going to clean up, and then we'll make cookies together.

If you do all your chores, then we can enjoy a movie this weekend or an hour of screen time. Think about ways to make the process of learning and completing the chores, F-U-N. Otherwise, the parent is just trying to control the child into doing the chore, which then becomes another chore for the parent. Right? You can relate to this.

The parent goes, we'll just forget it. I might as well just do it myself. Because the work has to get done. I'm not having any fun. You're not having any fun. This is costing me more energy fighting about the chores, or nagging you about it than it is just doing the chores. In other words, this is depleting my energy account rather than adding to it. So I'll just do it myself. Right? Been there?

Okay. So if I do want my kids to do some chores, Lisa, how do I go about this? How can I make it fun or interesting for them? Well, some parents consider introducing chores to their kids by sitting them down for a family meeting, and telling them something like things are really rough right now. Is there anything you can think of to do that will help me out? Or I need to lean on you, or I need more help from you. They're hoping if it's the kids own idea, it might go better, and they might feel more invested motivated, and inspired to jumping in and doing the work.

Well, there are a couple of problems with this idea. First, I would not recommend that you tell your kids it's a rough time right now. It's fine to have some things be their own idea for contributing, but I wouldn't preface it with there's a problem here at home. That's a big burden for kids to take on at any age.

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Chores aren't necessary for kids to do just because the chores are burden to mom and dad. They can be necessary because there's always a lot of laundry and always a lot of dishes and always a lot of lunches to pack. It doesn't need to be a crisis. You can just be a fan of saying more hands make easy light work, or I would like you to contribute.

I'd rather parents say I'm looking for ways that you can contribute to the family, or many hands make light work, or I don't want to do all the workload for six people. I'd like to have some cooperation and some help. That's going to feel much better, and the kids going to be able to hear the message much easier. Then you could say can we brainstorm together and some things that each of you could do regularly? I'd rather see you take that on as a philosophy rather than there's a problem that you're responsible for fixing.

Secondly, as you know because I talk about it all the time, kids have underdeveloped prefrontal cortexes. They do not have the executive function that it takes to feel invested, motivated, and inspired to do the chores, especially if they don't consider them F-U-N.

Many parents also feel that making kids do chores is a matter of teaching responsibility. Well, let me tell you something. Kids don't really care about responsibility or learning life's lessons. The younger they are, the less they grasp the concept of responsibility. Things like we worked hard for these things, so you'll need to pitch in and take care of them.

The concept of responsibility comes from family conversations about values and demonstrating the values by modeling pitching in and doing the chores. Not just spouting out a bunch of words that explain why they should do the work, that isn't F-U-N to them.

Consider this place. The life lesson of responsibility is the after effect of doing the chores, rather than precursor to motivating them to do it. If a parent tries to use his words as a precursor to motivate their kid, 99% of

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the time the parent gets disappointed because the lecture to motivate their kid to do the work didn't work. It didn't work because the kids really don't understand what the parent is saying.

If a kid's regularly been pitching in for years, and then they look back on that and say I'm a responsible person because I was able to contribute to the family. My parents ran the ship, and they didn't have to worry about everyone doing their part. It was teamwork. That is a reflection of the effort done rather than a projection of the future.

I see this with my 19 year old son, Malcolm. He told me the other day, "Mom, I really understand now how important it is to dad that I go to college." He could not have understood this until very recently. Through years of conversation after conversation with his dad about focusing on his grades and checking his homework.

Dave talking to him about getting a degree and finishing something, talking to him about opportunities and advancement in companies and being able to pick your career. Malcolm really didn't understand care about those things. Those were just ideas and words coming out of Dave's mouth.

Now at 19 and looking back at what his dad has always modeled for him, and all of his own efforts through the years, Malcolm can now recognize the value in all the things that Dave's been talking to him about along the way. He sees the value in going after and completing the education.

Here's what I know for sure. You have to demonstrate and model things like responsibility and work and goals in order for our kids to get the lesson. It's like a parent who works out every day or fitness is a part of the regular life.

The kids learned to value fitness because their parents modeled that for them versus the dad who lays on the couch every night, and told me I should go work out while he ate pretzels and drink beer. I know that one firsthand. So there was telling me to be healthy and fit rather than modeling

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it for me by the parent leading the charge and being the model for what's possible.

So back to chores, what works? Here's my suggestions. Number one, start small. Build upon it. Start really small. For the love of God, please be explicit. This is one of the biggest mistakes I often see parents making. Parents think okay, it's time for my child to start doing chores because I'm overwhelmed and I need help. Or they're of the age, or they tell me they're bored all the time. So they think they're bored. Well, I'm going to give them some work to do.

So then they ask the child, what do you want to do to help? The child says I don't know. I'll take out the garbage and put the dishes away. The parent says great, and then they move on expecting kid knows how to do it. The parent gives the kid no training. They don't explain what it means to take out the garbage to my satisfaction. So the kid has absolutely no training.

The parent doesn't say okay, the first thing you do is you pull the lining out of the trash bag off the edges of the can then you seal it up. Then with one hand on the string and your other hand in the bottom, you carry it out. Because if you lift it out, and it's too heavy and it falls, or you don't cinch it, the trash will fall out or leak through the house and around the garbage cans on the outside, and then the animals will come. So this is how you do this job really well step by step.

If we're honest with ourselves, most of us parents offer no training to our kids on how to do the chore to our satisfaction, or they are not explicit with their kid so that they can get it right 100% of the time, the first time, and all the time. Remember, be incredibly explicit, offer training, show them exactly how to do it. Do not assume.

Okay, number two, be patiently consistent. Here's the thing, kids have little to no prefrontal cortex. They don't connect the dots. They don't remember. They don't anticipate. Many times, frankly, they don't care. So your job

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while teaching them and creating the habit of chores is to be patiently consistent.

Back to the garbage can example when the kid doesn't remember because he can't remember the Tuesday is garbage day, every day of the week because it's not in his radar. He doesn't have a fully developed prefrontal cortex. He's not super dialed in. Maybe he was never trained how to do it right.

When you come home Tuesday night from being out at a meeting, and you realize the garbage can is not out in front of the house. It's easy to get mad dysregulated and triggered. But we need to be patiently consistent in reminding them because they have little to no prefrontal cortex. They're not connecting the dots.

So as an example, my son has been taking the garbage out every Tuesday night since he was 12. At 19, he's just now putting all the dots together. He called me the other day, one day last spring on his way home from school and said, "Hey, Mom, I just realized today is Tuesday, and Tuesday's garbage day. When I get home, I'll put the garbage out."

I was like yay, victory, victory, victory. Every Tuesday for eight years this kid's been putting the garbage can out on the curb, and it took that long for his brain to form the habit around Tuesday's garbage day. I should put the can out. I was patiently consistent with him.

Another client of mine told me she would get so mad when she would tell her 14 year old daughter to do the dishes. The mom would later check and would end up disappointed and angry because what she told her daughter to do in her mind was not completed to our expectations. What the mom realized one day was that her idea of doing the dishes was different from her daughter's.

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The mom's idea of doing the dishes meant to thoroughly wash the dishes top to bottom inside and out around the rims. Thoroughly rinse each one, and rinse the dog food bowl and water bowl, dry all the dishes with a clean towel, put all the dishes away where they belong. Wipe down the dish strainer, and put it away. Empty the trash from the sink strainer into the trash can. Spray and wipe down all the countertop, stovetop, kitchen table, and inside the sink, then rinse out the cloth and wipe it down a second time. That's a lot of steps. Yeah?

What the mom learned was after modeling what she meant by doing the dishes, and this mom realized that she had not trained her daughter and had not been patiently consistent. So she wrote down a checklist of each step, each step, each and every step that I just listed, and she hung it on the refrigerator. Voila.

Since then, her daughter has met her expectations every time. Communication, training, and patiently consistent. And the daughter felt more feel good chemical hits from completing the job well and not being criticized or charged with character flaws for not knowing what her mom really wanted or meant when the mom said do the dishes. Be patiently consistent.

Suggestion number three, modeling and training builds connection. As parents, we have incredibly high expectations because we've decided it's time for the kids to start doing chores, but we rarely offer any training. We very rarely catch them doing things right. Instead our brain focuses on why didn't he remember to put out the trash can on a Tuesday, and why did she not wipe down the countertops.

Then we get mad at them when the garbage falls out the bottom, even though we didn't give them any training. Or they go out there to make it fun. Two of them go out there together. One lifts the lid, and the other jars catapult the garbage in because they're trying to make it fun. Then the bag

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breaks, and the garbage goes all over the place. then we get mad. But we've done no training.

So they don't even really know what the, quote, right way is to take the garbage out. Instead of letting them feel a sense of accomplishment from the training, they feel bad about themselves because we're mad at them because they, quote, didn't do it right even with no training.

I mean, let's be honest here. Most of us if we bought a subway shop, and we were going to hire a bunch of high school kids, we would not treat them this way. We would train them over and over and over on how to make sandwiches until they got it.

Because we would understand that they knew nothing. In many instances, it would be their first job. They've not made a ton of sandwiches, and they've also not made sandwiches the Subway way. So we would train them patiently until they got it until they knew how to do it the Subway way to make the sandwiches consistently every time.

But for some reason, when we give our kids chores, we just expect them to know how to do everything. Do it right, do it efficiently, do it consistently, and never make mistakes. So please, please, please, let's train them. Let them feel that feel good chemical hit to their brain from doing the job.

Manage your expectations. The first time your kid does a new job or maybe the second time, they're probably not going to do it well. Praise them anyway. Let them feel that feel good chemical hit. The first time someone does a job, they're only going to do it well about 60%. But giving them praise for that 60% will help them want to do it 70% next time and so on and so on.

When we keep praising the effort, the more and more each time will feel good and the better they'll get at it. An eight year old, a 16 year old, an 18 year old is probably not going to do any job to a 30 year old's standards or

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40 year old or 50 year old. You don't have to make that mean anything about you. You definitely don't have to make it mean anything negative about your kid. That he or she has character flaw because they're not doing the chore perfectly.

It doesn't mean they're going to be living under a bridge with a shopping cart. It doesn't mean they're rude or disrespectful or lazy. It just means they haven't mastered the chore yet. The reality is kids don't care about garbage or dishes or the dirty bathroom.

Lastly, I want to share with you that each one of us shows up to parenting with different lenses and perspectives. That's okay. Some of us may feel that the world is going to implode if our kids and other family's kids don't learn to do chores from an early age with a sense of integrity and responsibility.

Others of us, on the other hand, may have lived traumatic childhoods with painful memories of having to do slave like chores for dominant parents who insisted we existed only in order to serve them. Still others may be somewhere in between the two extremes, and that's okay.

The tip is to recognize where you are on the spectrum, on the continuum, and acknowledge that you do bring your own lens and perspective to your parenting, especially around chores, and so does your co-parent. That's okay. Just have an awareness.

In closing, I want to encourage you also to allow your kids to enjoy their childhood. We have our whole lives to master adulthood. Build connection, train your kids, model and demonstrate for them, and understand their brains are far from being fully developed.

Chores can sometimes be the perfect opportunity to allow our kids to feel that feel good chemical the brain releases when we feel accomplished, when we feel accomplishments, when we feel good about what we've

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done. If nothing else, use chores as an opportunity for your kids to see progress, to build self-esteem, to learn how to train and get better and better at things, and then to receive compliments for the effort and the progress they are making.

There's a lot of value in our kids feeling good about themselves and getting that feel good chemical hit from the brain for their accomplishments. Yeah? Awesome.

Okay, so to recap, in today's episode we delved into the complex world of parenting and chores. We addressed a common question, when should children start doing chores? There's no one size fits all answer, I promise you. It depends on various factors like family dynamics, workload, and the child's emotional development.

I want to emphasize the importance of making chores engaging and rewarding for our kids as well as the need for clear communication and collaboration within the family. Additionally, I tried to highlight the role of modeling and training and building connection with our children, and instilling a sense of responsibility over time.

Today, my goal was for you to walk away with a sense of importance of patience, understanding, and compassion as the parent in navigating the challenges of household responsibilities. As we wrap up today's episode, I want to encourage you to reflect on your own approach to chores and parenting.

Remember, there's no perfect formula. There's no right answer. Each and every family is unique. By fostering a supportive and nurturing environment, we can empower our children to contribute to the household while still allowing them to enjoy their childhoods. As always, I want us to continue to prioritize connection, communication, and cooperation in our parenting journey. Sound good? Awesome. Thank you for tuning in. Until next time, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

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Thank you so much for listening today. I want to personally invite you to head over to thepeacefulparent.com/welcome and sign up for my free peaceful parenting minicourse. You'll find everything you need to get started on the path to peaceful parenting just waiting for you over there at www.thepeacefulparent.com/welcome. I can't wait for you to get started.

Thanks for listening to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*. If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit thepeacefulparent.com. See you soon.