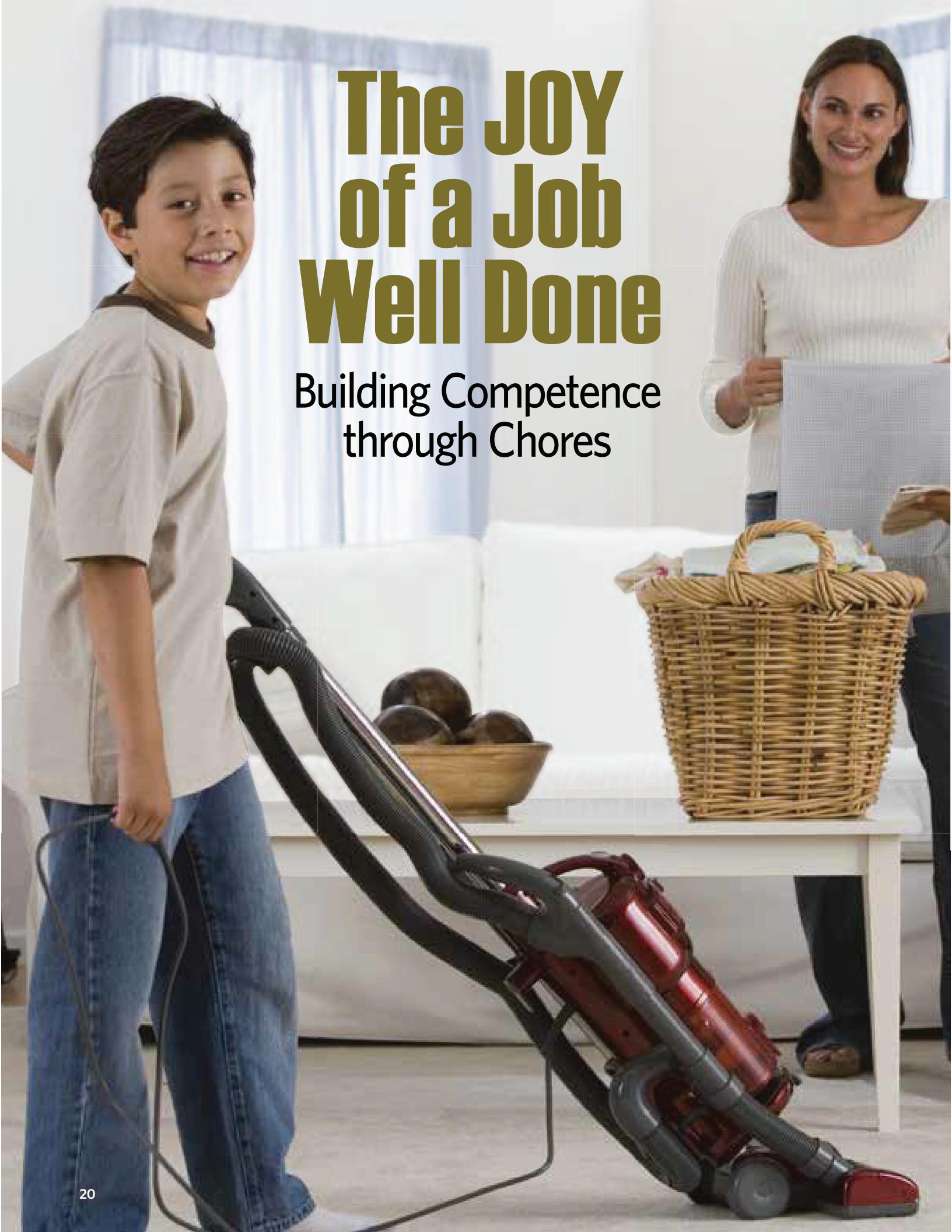


# The JOY of a Job Well Done

Building Competence  
through Chores



**MANY YEARS AGO, MY FAMILY AND I SPENT A FEW DAYS** at a bed-and-breakfast on a working dairy farm. Our three-year-old son rose way too early, and we went down to the dining room with bleary eyes for some coffee and breakfast. Polite and upbeat even at that early hour, our server Anna greeted us. We soon learned that Anna was the sixteen-year-old daughter of the owners of the farm.

Anna took our order, and once she had placed the food on the table, asked, "Is there anything else you need? If not, would you mind if I go upstairs now and clean your room? I'm hoping that I can get my chores done early so I can get some time to go horseback riding this afternoon."

Impressed by her work ethic and thoughtfulness, I said, "It's really nice of you to help your parents this way."

Anna looked at me for a moment, seemingly confused by my comment. Finally she said softly, "How else could my parents do all this without my help?"

My experience with Anna was a turning point as a parent and as a psychologist. While my own experience with doing household chores had already predisposed me to seeing their value, I began to view chores from a psychologist's perspective as well.

I sought out research about chores, and I soon learned that research validates the importance of allow-

ing children to be contributing members of the family. Chores provide an opportunity for children to learn values and acquire skills that set a foundation for their development. They also offer the circumstances that allow children to build competence and confidence, thereby increasing their likelihood of lifelong success.

Based on what I learned I began to incorporate chores into the treatment plans for many of the children with ADHD with whom I worked (including my own!).

For many parents of children with ADHD, it often feels easier to just do the household chores themselves. After all, it is daunting enough to get children with ADHD and executive challenges through the daily routines of getting to school and doing homework. However, with just a few accommodations, we can help our children with ADHD to get up and running on household chores.

And really, couldn't you use the help?

## Chores to Grow On

### PRE-SCHOOL

- Match the socks from the clean laundry
- Take recycling to the storage bin
- Bring in the newspaper and mail
- Help set the table
- Help make the bed
- Help feed and water pets
- Help change the towels (put dirty towels into the hamper)
- Help clean up spills
- Dust accessible surfaces



### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

- Help with cooking and cleaning in the kitchen
- Pack lunch
- Clear the dishes
- Load and start dishwasher
- Empty the dishwasher
- Sort laundry; use the washer and dryer
- Dust
- Vacuum
- Outdoor chores (such as planting, weeding, raking)
- Take out the trash
- Care for pets
- Clean the bathroom

### MIDDLE SCHOOL AND OLDER

- Mow the lawn and other yard work
- Laundry
- Care for younger siblings
- Pack lunches for self and other family members
- Plan and cook meals
- Clean interior and exterior of car
- Experienced drivers can run errands



## **Children benefit from doing chores**

Psychologist Edna Copeland offered a summary of the ways children benefit from chores in her audiotaped behavioral intervention program, titled *The Joy of a Job Well Done*, back in 1987. Pointing to the outcome data at year forty of an ongoing Harvard longitudinal study, she noted that, out of all the many variables studied, one of the strongest predictors of adult happiness and success was the amount of meaningful work done as a child, including chores and extracurricular jobs outside the house.

While cultural changes in the United States over the last century have led to an increased focus on raising happy children, there has been less emphasis on raising competent and productive children, Dr. Copeland noted. "The truth is that life requires more of us than being happy and life will require more of our children."

More recent research on the benefits of chores for children is highlighted in the aptly titled book, *How Much Is Enough? Everything You Need to Know to Steer Clear of Overindulgence and Raise Likeable, Responsible, and Respectful Children* (Da Capo Press, 2003).

It is also important to note that shifts in the field of education have led to an emphasis on academic achievement, often at the expense of competence and productivity in other arenas.

Yet, chores offer a context in which children with ADHD can be successful and proud of their performance, even when their impulsiveness, inattention, or disorganization may lead to lackluster school achievement.

## **Getting started**

Including children in household work (particularly when started at a young age) feels good to kids. In fact, young children often ask if they can help, yet we exclude them because we are "too busy" to let them help us.

The younger the child, the easier it is to engage her in doing chores. That does not mean that you can't initiate chores with older children or adoles-



## **Parent Guidelines for Chores**

- Treat chores as a necessity, not a favor.
- Don't re-do your child's job after him. Instead, teach your child to do the job well with some allowances for imperfection.
- Apply basic rules of behavior management when you teach a child to do a chore or when you first introduce chores to an older child:
  - Provide lots of positive reinforcement.
  - Praise your child for what he has done right before telling him what he has done wrong.
  - Take a teaching versus a punishing approach.
  - Focus on chore completion rather than attitude. Attitude follows behavior, so praise your child for doing the task and deal with the attitude, if necessary, once the chore routines are well established.

cents, but you should expect that it will take more time for them to settle into the new expectations.

You may want to introduce chores at a family meeting. Tell your children that you have too much to do to complete all the household work yourself, and explain that you also want everyone to learn to contribute to the family. When children feel needed, they are more likely to rise to the occasion. So, do not ask them to do chores as a favor to you. Ask for their help because you need it.

Praise and recognition are the best rewards for successfully completing chores. Praise should not be excessive, but should be specific to the task and meaningful. "The living room looks really nice now. You did a great job." Or, "That was a lot of recycling to take out today!"

When you convey to your child that you are counting on him to complete his tasks, then you allow pride of ownership to kick in. For this reason, you should not go behind your child and re-do what he has done. If he has not performed up to standard (assuming you're not expecting perfection), then praise him for the parts he did well and teach him how to do it better. If you re-do the job, then your child will feel that his work is superfluous.

There are a variety of ways to divide up household chores. Choose a system that suits your child's temperament and your own. A child (or parent) who prefers routines and dislikes change would benefit from assigned chores that are always the same, whereas a more flexible child might prefer to rotate chore assignments with siblings. Some families develop a list of tasks that need to be done on a daily, weekly or occasional basis and let the children pick from each column at a weekly family meeting. Some parents choose and post daily jobs on a blackboard.

Whatever the chore system, it is best to set clear expectations for when tasks need to be done and what will happen if they are not completed. A well thought-out plan presented in advance will minimize strong emotional reactions and power struggles.

If your child does not complete her chores by the specified time, how should you respond? Consider asking your children what they think the consequences should be. Perhaps you could create a rule that "chore time" comes before TV, computer and video game time. Only when chores are completed does your child have electronic access. For social children, perhaps they must complete chores before they can play with friends.

Some families set up a weekend time when everyone in the family does their weekly jobs, and no one goes out until the jobs are complete.

Posting a chore board with space to check off tasks on a daily basis helps to remind children of their chores and offers visible recognition of their contributions.

Many children with ADHD, particularly those who have significant problems with executive functioning or who tend to be oppositional, are already on behavioral systems that incorporate points and rewards. If so, it is helpful to include chores in the point system.

Expect complaints, at times, particularly from oppositional children or when you first initiate chores with older children. So, what should you



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do when your child complains about doing chores? Rather than arguing with him, consider aligning yourself with his perspective instead. After all, don't you complain about household tasks sometimes, even if it is only inside your own head? Admittedly, your child is more likely to complain out loud. "Why do I have to take out the trash? I hate these stupid chores!" Your reply? "I know! Me, too! I hate shopping and cooking and doing laundry all the time. But they do need to be done." Your tone is important here. If the child feels you are making fun of him or being demeaning, then you negate the effects of the shared experience. If the complaining continues, sometimes the best reply is a silent shrug of the shoulders. Then stick to the consequences you have laid out in advance if the chores are not done.

Don't be fooled by complaining. The same child who whines about chores to you may still get on the phone with a grandparent and say, "I took out the trash all by myself!" Similarly, I have heard teens complain about "doing all the work," but then express negative judgments about peers who are "pampered" and "don't even do any chores." Even though they may complain, children who do chores seem to recognize their importance.

### **Modifications for executive functioning weaknesses**

Children and teens with ADHD and executive functioning challenges may need extra help to plan and persist with chores.

Does your child have difficulty with organizing and remembering the steps to complete a task? Sit down with her and create a step-by-step list of what each job involves. Be clear about the specific expectations. Do you expect your child to move the knicknacks when he dusts the living room? Do you want the top of the refrigerator cleaned in the kitchen? Laminate the list of steps so that she has a template to use each time she does the chore and so that she can check off each step as she completes it.

Does your child have difficulty with getting started on tasks? Then you will likely need to set aside a specific time each day for chores so that they become routines. Initially, you will probably need to give a warning that "chore time" is coming up and signal when it is time. You may even need to start the task with her to get her rolling.

Is it a complex, multi-step task? Then maybe it should be completed over several days so as not to be overwhelming.

If your child tends to have difficulty with accurately assessing his own work, then you will need to highlight the process of reviewing and analyzing his own work. For example, when your child announces that he has completed a task, you can instruct him to go back and "be the parent." "Go stand in your room and look at it as if you were the parent. Would you say that it's all cleaned up? If not, take a moment and fix it."

Many children with ADHD also have language processing weaknesses. If that is the case for your child, offer hands-on learning when you introduce a chore. Walk her through the steps by doing the job with her at first. After that, use the "guided practice" model common in classrooms; stay nearby when she first does the job on her own so that you can guide her if she misses a step.

With creativity and a little extra thought, we can include our children with ADHD in household work. When we do so, we help them to develop into capable young adults who feel competent to take care of themselves. What an opportunity! ☺

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