

Household Chores for a Child with Autism

Introduction

Many parents of children with autism believe that their child may not be capable of helping with household chores. However, your child may be ready and willing to help. Helping with chores will allow your child to be more independent and gain confidence in caring for themselves. Of course, you may need to modify chores and to teach them how to do chores in a way that they can understand. You will also need to take the time to practice and master these skills. This document discusses ways in which you can teach your child to help with chores.

Appropriate Chores for Children

Picking appropriate chores depends on a child's ability to understand how to complete a chore, their physical ability to handle the chore and their motivation to complete the chore. There are many lists of age appropriate chores that caregivers can refer to for ideas on what kinds of chores to assign to children. For children with autism however, age will not necessarily determine their readiness to complete a chore. You will need to determine whether your child is developmentally ready for the chore and if they have the necessary prerequisite skills to independently complete the chore. Each child will be different in this regard. You are the best judge of what your child might be able to do around the house, but here are some questions you can consider.

Ask yourself: What do you want your child to be doing independently around the house? Will this chore help them develop new social or functional skills? Can your child physically perform these chores without help? Do they have the gross and fine motor skills to complete the task? If not, think about what you will need to teach them first so that they are able to perform these chores.

Is your child motivated to perform these chores? If not, think about ways in which you can motivate them. Will your child have the attention span to attend to the chore until it is complete? Younger children may need chores that can be completed in a very short amount of time, such as placing a cereal box in the recycling bin.

In general, here are some suggestions for common chores sorted by age. You need to determine what your child might be willing and able to do. You can start by picking one chore and focusing on that until your child can complete it independently.

Toddlers (age 2-3): Assist with making the bed; Pick up their own toys; Dust with a feather duster; Put dirty clothes in the laundry hamper.

Preschoolers (age 4-5): Set the table; Clear the table; Take out recycling (except glass items); Match socks; Put away clean laundry; Water plants; Feed a pet; Tidy room.

Age 6-8: Fold towels and clean laundry; Tidy room and common use areas; Mop floors; Make salad or simple snacks; Replace toilet rolls; Take out light trash; vacuum; Get mail.

Age 9-12: Make simple meals; Take garbage to the curb; Load dishwasher and start it; Do laundry; Sweep floors, porch; Put groceries away; Packing a lunch for school.

Age 13+: Clean bathrooms; Wash car; Do simple home repairs; Clean windows; Shop for groceries with an adult; Clean out the fridge; Maintain the yard.

This list is extensive, but not exhaustive. There may be other chores that you would like your child to do. Be sure to pick chores that you believe your child can do safely without injuring themselves or others.

Teaching Your Child to Do Chores

There are several techniques you can use to teach your child to do simple chores. Let's take a look at some of them.

Task Analysis – Task analysis is a technique where you break a chore down into multiple smaller steps and teach your child each of these steps until they understand how to do the complete chore. You must think about each step of a task in order to identify the steps you will teach your child. When writing up a task analysis, think about how the completion of each step leads to the next one. For a child with autism, you may need to modify a chore for them to be able to complete it.

For instance, if you asked your child to water the plants, your task analysis would begin with, 1. Get watering can. 2. Bring it to garden hose (or to sink). 3. Put watering can under the hose (or faucet). 4. Turn on the water. And so on. As you can see, there are several steps to watering plants. You can prompt your child and assist them in the beginning, until they are able to complete the chore on their own. Teaching your child to do each of these steps, is also referred to as chaining. You can work with your child's therapist

to do a task analysis for a chore that you are interested in. For more information on chaining, you can review our module on Teaching Your Child to Dress.

Modify the Task – As you teach your child to do a chore, you may realize that they are not able to complete the entire chore on their own. In this case, you can modify the task to have fewer or simpler steps. For example, if you are teaching your child to do laundry, and they are not able to make a decision about which type of cycle to select for different types of clothes, you can teach them to use one specific type of cycle for everything, and avoid giving them clothes that are unsuitable for that cycle. So, you can have them use the “normal wash” cycle, and pre-sort their laundry for hand wash, or delicate items.

Prompting – Prompts can be used to teach your child how to complete a chore. However, be careful about how often you prompt them and what types of prompts you use so that your child does not become dependent on your prompts to complete a chore. It is preferable to use as little verbal prompting as possible. The more you can make adjustments to a child’s environment to make them independent, the better. For example, if you want your child to help with putting away dishes, you may include pictures on the outside of drawers or cabinets that show what goes inside each one. Refer to our module on Prompting on the Porchlight site for more information.

Motivate and Use Reinforcers – Doing chores regularly may not come naturally to your child, and they will benefit from having some form of reinforcement as they learn to complete their chores. These can include praise- a lot of it! Or it could be a privilege, like watching their favorite show on TV, or even something simple like a sticker or treat. At first, you can reinforce them as they complete part of the chore. For example, if getting your child to do their own laundry is your goal, you can reward them with praise for putting their clothes in the laundry basket and bringing the basket to the laundry area. You can continue to reinforce them as they learn to do more steps in a chore. Selecting chores that personally affect the child will also make them more willing to participate in doing the chores. For example, if the child packs their own lunch they may be able to make choices about what they will get to eat. The more naturally reinforcing chores are, the easier they will be to teach.

Visual Aids – If your child has had experience using visual aids or schedules, use them as prompts or reminders for the various steps in a chore. If your

child is able to match pictures to actual objects or activities, this would be effective and helpful to guide them through the steps. Find or make pictures of each step in the chore to remind your child of what to do, and put the pictures in an easy to access, visible area. For example, if you are teaching a child to feed the dog, you may include a visual schedule with a picture of each step including, opening the container, scooping the food out, pouring the food into the bowl, and putting the scoop away.

Visual aids can also be used to prompt a child in other ways. For example, for sweeping the floor you may include a sticker on the broom where the child should place his hands so that he holds it properly. Another example may be to cover the buttons that the child does not need to press on the microwave so that only the correct buttons are visible. These visual clues act as a reminder for the child so that they do not need prompting from the adult and as the child gains independence they can be faded out over time.

Practice – Work together on chores until your child has had a chance to practice several times and is comfortable with the chore. Working together will be more fun for your child, and will allow them to learn from you as you go about doing the chore. Be flexible with how the chore is completed. If the child is not doing the chore well, or up to your standards, give them praise for their effort and for the things they are doing right! It will take a lot of practice for them to learn to do a chore completely and to your satisfaction, so be patient!

Conclusion

There are so many benefits to having your child help with chores, including greater self-confidence and independence. As you teach your child new chores, allow them some flexibility to choose chores that they like to do, or at least are not completely averse to. They are more likely to do them if they like to do them! Once your child gets into a routine of doing chores they like, then increase motivation for doing more chores that they might not like. If you are unable to teach them how to do chores despite trying some of the techniques mentioned earlier, you may want to see if your child’s therapist can assist you or suggest other ways to get your child to learn. Remember to offer lots of praise and support. You can find additional resources on our website, www.porchlighteducation.org.