

## CULTIVATING CAPABILITY: PART 2

### ••• STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING INDEPENDENCE

*Dear Barry,*

Your assertion about capability being connected to self-esteem just makes commonsense. Yet, I find myself doing way too much for my boys. I feel so guilty about not having the time to teach them, let alone supervise them! It's less nerve-racking for my husband or I to clean and attend to laundry than getting them to pitch in. It's also easier for the weekly cleaning service to disinfect the bathroom, vacuum their bedrooms, and change their bed sheets. Furthermore, my oldest claims that he has a demanding hockey schedule and I don't want to mess with his motivation, knowing that his enthusiasm for Grade 9 has petered out.

At times I do wonder how my underachieving Grade 6 son is going to make it in this world when he can't seem to find his running shoes or his schoolwork, or even brush his teeth without me haranguing him. I also lose sleep over the twins in Grade 1 as they coast along merrily without a worry while we all attend to their needs, including wiping noses when they drip.

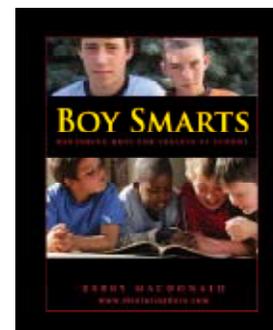
I yearn for simpler times, recalling that my childhood antics came to a standstill until my room was cleaned; that the television was off-limits until the dishes were done; and that work always came before play.

Thankfully my husband and I equally share household responsibilities and flexibility in response to our demanding careers. As I wrestle with engaging our boys more, it would be helpful to know your thoughts about reasonable expectations and guidelines for boys to help with chores so that they learn to become more self-reliant. I especially want them to learn the value of contributing and caring for others.

*Lynne ... in Regina*



Children need not only love and care, but also increasing opportunities to develop self-esteem through increasing independence and responsibility.



## Learning to self-govern is a slow, graduated process.

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*Dear Lynne,*

**You** are not alone in worrying about how your children will learn the necessary skills they need to manage their own lives, livelihoods, and perhaps their own families in the future. No doubt our own parents had similar anxieties about us, even though we may remember our own youth as a kind of golden era.

**Of** course, our own harried lives – where convenience, expedience, and instant gratification rule – are very unlike our parents' lives. Those who study family life are concerned about how increasing demands on our time might be eroding opportunities for parents to teach life skills and deepen connections with their children. A recent study about the changing tempos of family life found that our workloads have increased to a 9.25 hour workday, 7 days a week, with employed mothers averaging 10 hour workdays. With accelerated time pressures, we have less time to teach kids about household chores, and perhaps less time than our parents once did to model and teach practical skills such as cooking and cleaning. Indeed, few of us have been able to maintain the orderly and disciplined homes many of us once experienced.

**Not** surprisingly, while each generation of parents faces challenges unique to their time, children's basic needs remain unchanged. Children need not only love and care, but also increasing opportunities to develop self-esteem through increasing independence and responsibility. Learning to self-govern is a slow, graduated process. When 2 year old Johnny spills his juice, we gently guide him to wipe up. When Johnny is 4, we enlist his help to load the dishwasher. When he is 6, we may expect him to tear up lettuce for the salad or help a younger sibling get dressed. When he is 10, we expect him to rake the front yard leaves without any help or supervision.

**But** what if we don't take the time to teach our children to contribute in their earliest years? What if they don't learn to pick up those drooled Captain Crunch bits under chairs? What if they are not expected to pitch in and participate in household chores? What happens 10 years down the road when adolescents decide it is not their job to walk the dog, load the dishwasher, or help prepare meals? What happens when older children prefer going out with their peers instead of taking care of household responsibilities? Will we give up, hoping that they'll figure out how to be responsible eventually?



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## Providing service to others is often an indicator of mental health.

**Recent** studies have found that today's children spend more time in child-care and organized activities and less time on household responsibilities than they did twenty years ago. Where kids in middle childhood once spent just under 5.5 hours a week contributing to household chores such as meal preparation, pet care, and yard work, they now spend only three hours. Some parents may even be hard-pressed to tally an average of three weekly hours of chores for their kids.

**As** it turns out, doing household chores is also a major predictor of whether children will later contribute volunteer time or community work when they become adults. A recent study by Alice Rossi at the University of Massachusetts Amherst analyzed information on more than 3,000 adults and found a strong link between learning to contribute as a child and making contributions as an adult.

**While** I am hesitant to oversimplify with my own granny's kitchen wisdom – "you don't work, you don't eat" – studies like this one can remind us that changing cultural conditions do not necessarily change our children's core needs for growing autonomy and the value of learning to contribute. Learning to share domestic chores has become a critical marriage-preservation skill for young men. Furthermore, providing service to others is often an indicator of mental health. It is my hope that the following guidelines will assist you to explore ways that your family will be strengthened as your boys pitch in more.

### Recognize the primacy of a secure attachment

**Studies** indicate that infants who are secure in their attachment to us are more likely to assume age-appropriate independence and responsibility during their teen and adult years. Infant research has shown that it is caregivers' sensitive responsiveness that teaches our very young that the world is a safe place and that we can be trusted. It is from this emotionally secure place children will later venture to experiment with their curiosity and explore their initiative, knowing that they can return for love and guidance when they feel uncertain or threatened.

### Start young

**When** boys are approaching their second birthday, build on their desire to try to be like us by encouraging their helpful behaviour in everyday chores. As you take time to do simple tasks together, taking out the garbage, putting toys away, or transferring clothing to the dryer become essential parts of their daily lives. Incorporate a clean-up routine into your playtime together. Consider inviting your son's help with putting groceries onto a



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## Children copy our behaviour, whether we want them to or not.

check-out counter and handing you things to be put away into the kitchen pantry. By age two or three, boys can also help make their beds by handing you their pillow or opening up the pillow case as you change sheets. Your knowledge about your son's personality and frustration level will help you to discern "doable" tasks from ones beyond his capability at a given stage of development.

### Create routines

**Visit** a primary classroom where kids are happily learning and you'll discover an organized teacher who provides predictable routines for a reason: routines provide security for kids as they experiment with independence.

**When** your son starts kindergarten, you might provide him with an alarm clock to wake him each morning for school. Asking him to take charge of how he starts his day sends a powerful message that you believe in him and that you expect him to grow and develop.

**As** you focus on routine responsibilities, your four or five year old son will likely be able to empty his bedroom garbage can; put dirty clothes in hamper; get the newspaper; push chairs in after meals, place napkins on the table and help clear the table and floor after meals.

**Use** routines to reinforce good habits. Encourage him to help with loading and unloading non-breakable items from dishwasher, sort laundry and transfer clothes from dryer to basket, and put toys away in particular spots.

**Of** course, boys will mess up and slack off at times, particularly when they are learning a new routine, but once a structured routine becomes familiar, they will be likely to cooperate. If your twelve year old son is having an off day, rather than getting frustrated with him, just say calmly, "You always feed the fish right before we set the table."

### Lead by example

**Children** eagerly learn through imitation and are often more influenced by what we do than by what we say. When we overhear our four year old child scolding a younger sibling with the same sharp tone that we recently used, we realize how unintentional role-modelling and unplanned influences can be just as powerful as those we carefully design. Children copy our behaviour, whether we want them to or not.

**Recently**, a parent emailed claiming that in a moment of frustration she found herself lecturing: "What part of 'Don't touch that!' do you not un-



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derstand? The following day her 6 year old son kept talking on about how tired he was, but she persisted with her prompts: "Come on – let's get going!" She was humbled when he retorted: "What part of 'I'm tired' did you not get?"

**The** same holds true for older boys who absorb values around the ways we prioritize and distribute our time between work and family life. They learn from us when we make decisions to stick to our budget rather than over-extend our financial limits in a moment of weakness. While you need to respect that your oldest boy has a demanding hockey schedule, you would be wise to still insist that he contribute to the family's wellbeing with chores you both agree on. He might, for example, cook a meal one night per week, vacuum the entire house on the weekends, and regularly cut the lawn in the summer.

### Take time to explain

**Explaining** what we are doing and why we are doing it can further our children's learning. It's easy to forget how kids can be mystified by chores we have routinely been doing for ages. Whether we are completing a chore or contributing outside of the home, our children are more likely to understand our motivation and behaviour when we explain what we are doing, and why.

**When** beginning to clean a messy room, you might share your thought processes out loud, saying: "Oh, this place is such a mess, I don't know where to begin." It is likely that you'll be mirroring your son's own thoughts about his bedroom. Showing how you begin a task – "I guess I'll just dive into this closet and see how far I get before lunch" – demonstrates how to manage overwhelming tasks and highlights the value of breaking them down into manageable chunks.

**Getting** older boys involved in more complicated household chores – price comparison shopping, caring for the car, cleaning counters and floors, managing laundry – will prepare teens for becoming self-sufficient later.

### Hold family meetings

**While** many families have meetings only when crises occur, consider having weekly family meetings – perhaps while walking through a local park or sitting around the dinner table. These meetings give children opportunities for input on family life and teach how to operate by democratic dialogue or consensus rather than blind assumption. As you discuss varied topics such as planning the next family weekend road trip, making a schedule for chores, or purchasing a family computer, children will garner skills in problem-solving and collaborative decision-making – skills highly valued in today's world.



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## Family meetings teach how to operate by consensus rather than assumption...

**Experiment** with meeting formats that best suit family needs. When our boys were younger, they enjoyed a clearly organized meeting structure and the chance to experiment with official roles as chairperson or recorder, but as they got older, these formalities detracted from problem-solving practice, so we relaxed the meeting format to reflect our evolving needs.

### Focus on effort

**Remember** that it's more important to notice and comment on your son's effort and desire to contribute, rather than on whether chores are completed perfectly. When you notice your younger son overfilling the dog's water dish and spilling water onto the floor say: "I see that you are being very careful to get as much water in the bowl that you can. I hope Toby appreciates how much you care about him." Support him when he experiences frustration or difficulty by helping him wipe up the spilled water, and you will further teach him the value of working with others to achieve success.

### Pass up the temptation to redo a chore

**Realize** that your son will probably not complete the chore as efficiently or competently as you could at the beginning. It can be tempting to grab your son's clothes and fold them properly yourself. If you know he can do better, make a comment that uses your voice tone to convey your concern: "I guess that's an okay job with folding your T-shirts...". Your tone will be more than enough to get your point across.

### Keep it fun

**Most** people are more likely to enjoy tasks when they're lively and shared. You probably remember the saying: "Many hands make work light." Your nine year old son will love helping to wash the car on a hot day if spraying you with the hose is part of the plan. Whatever the age, cleaning can easily become a game. Consider playing some music and swivel your hips as you vacuum the hallway or scrub that toilet.

### Provide choices

**For** toddlers, opportunities to contribute need to be simple and clearly defined. You could ask very young children to choose between taking the newspaper to the table or the oven mitts to the counter. They might choose colours for their bath towel or tea shirt. As boys get older, gradually offer them more freedom to make choices that affect them, within age-appropriate limits set by you.

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## “I told you so” reminders fuel resistance and resentment...

### Let your child experience the outcome of his choices

As long as the outcome isn't harsh or dangerous, let your son live with the results of his behaviour and his decisions. When he becomes distracted with a program on television and burns his toast, stay quiet and let the burnt toast be his teacher. Over time he will learn that actions lead to certain outcomes, both positive and negative. When we remain supportive, careful not to criticize poor choices, boys will more likely accept the consequences for their actions. Consider that when your older sons leave sports equipment outside in the rain overnight – a favourite skateboard perhaps – the wheel bearings may become rusty. Avoid interrupting his learning experience with an “I told you so” reminder that often only shifts his disappointment about the results of his negligence to resentment about your reminder.

If he's usually responsible for packing his lunch each morning and one day forgets, don't hand-deliver it to his classroom later. He may regret having forgotten his lunch, but you can bet he'll remember it the next day.

### Sidestep scolding

It can be tough to maintain your cool when your son repeatedly fails to comply with reasonable expectations. But lectures and punishments rarely work, at least not over the long haul, and they won't teach him self-discipline. Be firm, yet respectful, simply stating the chore agreement: “At the last family meeting you agreed to empty the dishwasher and your brother would load the dishwasher. Your help in the kitchen is important.”

**Another** way to respond is through the use of humour, which wakes up the brain. Younger children especially love it when we behave in silly ways. Instead of reprimanding your youngster for leaving his breakfast bowl on the floor where the dog will undoubtedly find it, address the subject a little later by saying: “Let's pretend this is an empty bowl from breakfast. What can we do with it? We can (pause) wear it like a hat! Wouldn't that be silly. I know, we can (pause) turn it upside down and pretend it's a chair! Hey I know, we can (pause) put it in the sink!” While you both enjoy the foolishness of this game, your son will learn to compare solutions and will more likely place his cereal bowl in the sink the next morning.

### Give clues but avoid nagging

Many parents and teachers get exasperated with what they see as the need to repeat instructions day in and out, often several times a day: “How of-



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## While money can be an incentive for boys who need a motivational boost...

ten do I have to tell you to hang up your wet jacket when you come inside?" Scolding reminders are unlikely to change behaviour, and are more likely to fuel negativity in your relationship. Sometimes, it can be more effective to use a nonverbal gesture by pointing to the desired solution. You might also refocus your instruction so the stimulus of coming in the door becomes the cue: "Go back outside, come back in, and hang your wet jacket where it can dry." Whether your cues are verbal or non-verbal, realize how a facial expression or tone of your voice can escalate conflict or help with constructive learning.

### Caution about cash for chores

**While** money can be an incentive for boys who need a motivational boost, remember that helping out at home is part of being a member of your family. For this reason it is best to avoid tying allowance to everyday chores and paying children for being family members. While it may be reasonable to pay your son for something that you would typically pay someone else to do, such as washing your car, remember that hiring out your domestic chores may set up another predicament; for example, your boys may learn to buy into a gender stereotype in which the person who scrubs the toilet is a low-wage earning woman. For this reason many parents who work full time and can afford to hire help often choose not to.

### Parents aren't perfect

**These** days most families live overscheduled and overwhelmed lives with precious few minutes remaining in the day to tackle chores. If your family is trapped in a time crunch, it may be time to reevaluate your priorities around work-life balance. You all benefit when everyone pitches in to help make your home a safe, ordered refuge from outside chaos and pressures.

**Teaching** children to contribute may be seen as teaching stewardship. By helping with chores, children internalize the realization that they are part of a larger whole, and that they have something meaningful to offer. As you consider your own boys' motivation to contribute, take into consideration your own track record. If you have consistently cleaned up after them over the years, they will likely become resistant if you expect too much too soon. Go slow and steady, but resist the urge to give in.

**Finally**, let's just accept that none of us are capable of perfect parenting or anything close to it. We don't always do what we say and say what we mean. We are human – as are our kids – and we need the courage to be



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# We need balance, perspective, and compassion toward ourselves and our kids

gentle with ourselves and our own limitations. As you manage the ups and downs of implementing household chores, avoid focussing on mistakes – whether yours or your son’s. If we are to mentor boys to develop independence and a sense of self-worth in the family and the wider community, we need balance, perspective, and compassion toward ourselves and others. As you and your son rake up leaves or clean up after a meal, allow yourself a moment to breathe deeply, celebrating the small successes of everyday family life. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*

MentoringBoys.com



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## **Boy Smarts - Mentoring Boys for Success at School**

Consider also reading Chapter 9: **Discipline that teaches rather than punishes**  
“Discipline that is rigid or humiliating inevitably erodes a boy’s self-confidence. Unlike punishment, which tends to shame, effective discipline should address the behaviour directly without causing anger or bitterness... The challenge is maintain connection through the discipline process without shaming or breaking the relationship bond.”

