

Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

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Chores and the Outcome Beyond Independence

You should most definitely give your child with autism chores. Regardless of where he falls on the autism spectrum, his diagnosis is not a "free pass" to abstain from being a contributing member of your household. William Sullivan

Carol's Club member, Jodie, and her son, Parker, have started something (Gray, 2020)! The value of completing childhood chores is indisputable. A typical adolescent raised without chores may be able to "catch up" and learn how to complete daily tasks from peers as needs arise. For children diagnosed with autism, the stakes of missing the opportunity to learn chore-related concepts and skills from their caregivers, and becoming independent, are higher. But is independence the goal? This project reconsiders chores with respect for autism and submits that independence falls far short of our desired outcome. An alternate outcome is offered, and its impact on how we approach chores – what we say and do, the strategies we employ, and the Social Stories that we write – is explored.



“Do I *Have To*?”

I know the battles surrounding chores as a parent and as a consultant to families with autism. (In retrospect, I feel more successful as a consultant on this issue.). There are times when our efforts seem to pale in comparison to that of our forty-two-pound child! Our role as adults can be frustrating, especially those moments when we realize that the time that we’ve invested in getting our child to complete a chore has long since exceeded just doing it ourselves. If the dog is hungry, or a pre-requisite job that we’ve assigned to our child stands in the way of reaching a larger goal, it is often easier to go with the advice of Nike, Inc. and “just do it.” In response to the parental plea that titles this section, “Do I have to?”, with sincere and serious empathy, my answer is “yes.” If you are a parent, I believe your patience and resilience will be a pivotal and decisive factor in your child’s future and your own.

Why?

At this writing, a Google search of “children with autism and chores...” yields 1.5 million sites. Many of them list the benefits of household chores, including the acquisition of practical skills, increased confidence, responsibility, and long-term independence as adults.

As an observer of the efforts of parents of children with autism over the years, I have developed a theory. Parents of children with autism who have a clear understanding of the ultimate goal raise children with the most successful outcomes.

What is the ultimate goal? Independence is one of the most frequently cited reasons for requiring a child to do chores, but I don’t think that’s it. My experience suggests that the parents who patiently insist that their child complete daily chores, who “stick with it” and never give up, have their sights on a different goal. Independence is an essential, but it’s not our desired destination.



Interdependence

In the late 1980s, I was working as a consultant to students with autism at Jenison Public Schools in Jenison, Michigan. We received a grant that made it possible to place severely to moderately impaired students with autism in a series of vocational experiences in the community. I looked for a curriculum to use with students working in local businesses.

It was during this time that Dr. Stephen R. Covey, a noted educator, businessman, and author, published, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” (1989). It became a best-seller and is considered a classic with 25 million copies sold to date. According to Covey, the seven habits move people from dependence to independence, and finally to the ultimate goal of interdependence. Effective interdependence is working, living, and playing successfully as part of a whole, involved and contributing to something greater than the sum of its parts.

Covey’s book created a paradigm shift. As parents and professionals, we tend to default to independence as a desired outcome. In education, the goal dictates everything: objectives, activities, assignments, instructional strategies, and evaluation methods. If we’re working toward the wrong goal, we miss the opportunity to build concepts and skills in line with the most desirable outcome.

Abandoning independence as a goal and replacing it with interdependence was like dealing an entirely new set of cards. We developed a curriculum based on Stephen R. Covey’s seven habits. (Click [here](#) if you’d like to take a look

at it.). I had never taught this way before! We began teaching concepts and skills not typically found in traditional curriculums, and abandoned unimportant objectives. For example, the curriculum structured each vocational placement with a pre-and-post activity that taught our students to make predictions about their abilities. They indicated where they might need assistance in the assigned workplace, then compared that to their performance. Following this process over several vocational experiences, our students made increasingly accurate predictions about their abilities, preparing them for the day when they present themselves to an employer. Teaching according to Covey's habits was exciting; it threw the doors open to several instructional discoveries, among them, Social Stories. We'll get back to them later.

Replacing the goal of independence with interdependence, chores make even greater sense than they did before. Chores are nothing less than a valuable curriculum that teaches the many concepts and skills that make it possible for us to live and work effectively with others.

Alex and Interdependence

Alex is a former student of mine. We met in 2001 when he was eight years old. (If you have seen one of my presentations, you may know Alex as the person at the center of the Canada Goose story.). Alex's parents made sure that he was a part of things at home (chores, activities, and family entertainment) and in the community (Boy Scouts, his dad was the leader). This frustrated Alex. I have to admit, there were times that I privately wondered if their efforts were "going too far." It wasn't that they became angry or abusive. Not at all. They were loving, caring, understanding, and patiently steadfast in their expectations, never abandoning a request or assignment and modifying it only if needed. When Alex's refusals were intense or long-term, his parents would turn to me for ideas and inspiration. To date, Alex's parents are by far the most consistently insistent parental team that I have ever known.

Today, Alex is twenty-six, and I am his occasional coach. We meet informally at a local diner. At our last meeting, I asked Alex if he remembered doing chores as a kid. He does. Alex shared that he was determined not to complete them (same as I recall), but, as Alex recounted, "...my parents didn't care. I had to wash the dishes anyway." (I remember that, too). Alex quietly laughed and conceded, "I just get up from dinner and wash the dishes now. It's no big deal."

Dishwashing pales in comparison to his current activities. Alex drives, has a job, helped cook the turkey this past Thanksgiving, and two geese at Christmas. He attends classes at the local college, will graduate next month from a course on selling electronics, and takes Taekwondo. Currently employed, Alex is looking for a better job in line with his recently completed training and has asked if I will serve as a reference. Last year, Alex had a girlfriend. They recently broke up after jointly deciding that their goals are incompatible. In this new year, Alex is looking forward to moving into a townhouse with three friends. He feels he's ready. I have not had any communication with Alex's parents since Alex graduated from high school, but he shared that his parents agree that he is ready to establish his own home. I agree.

The value of chores extends beyond skill acquisition. What every child learns doing chores is, "You're a competent member of our family, and we all benefit from your contributions." It's a positive daily message, even if it does arrive among a bit of resistance.



Start Anywhere

There are many articles that encourage parents and professionals to start the chore initiative when a child is young. I agree, but I can't tell you how many times my husband, Brian, and I began a system of chores with our children! Ours was a series of several false starts. The best bet? Begin when your child is young. If not then, start anytime.

Brian is a school psychologist. He stepped into a seventh-grade classroom recently and conducted an informal survey. The results suggest that chores are in full swing by early adolescence. Ninety-five percent of the students surveyed complete chores. Of those, one hundred percent are responsible for keeping their rooms clean and assisting with dinner dishes. Many of them also take out the garbage (80%), vacuum (80%), help with the laundry (50%), and dusting (20%). As to their comments, doing chores builds character, teaches skills, and "...makes sure that when you grow up, you won't be a slob."

Regardless of when kids are introduced to chores, a step-by-step approach and a steadfast focus on the goal are often cited as elements of success. A fort is not built from the top down. It begins with a foundation and blocks placed from the bottom up.

24/7 Support for Parents who Implement Chores

I was surprised by the ideas, information, and resources related to chores that are available online! I have listed some of them in the reference section. The Autism Community in Action site sorts chores by developmental age, with self-care tasks like toothbrushing listed among household chores like setting the table or feeding pets (T.A.C.A., no date). I suggest separating them - on chore charts and in conversation - to clarify communication and prevent "chores" from becoming something that is "everywhere" and overwhelming in number. I like Maureen Bennie's upbeat, positive, and practical ideas, and her observation that chores "...can also be a great activity to share with grandparents or family and friends who might not necessarily know how to interact with a child who is on the spectrum" (Bennie, 2016). An article by Kathy Dolbee, Autism Resource Specialist for the Autism Society of North Carolina, shares detailed ideas with an open invitation to contact her for assistance (Seeley, 2015). There are also non-traditional options, like an allowance system where a child may sub-contract his assigned chores to other siblings (West, no date). There's so much more! Initiating a Google search of "chores and autism" is like shopping in a market for a philosophy, strategies, and materials that fit!



Expand the Concept of Chores

In my review of *information* on the internet, I encountered several ideas to make chores fun for kids. Many of those suggestions require parental preparation and time, making them counterproductive and difficult to provide long term. I don't believe every chore has to be fun. I agree that an entertaining task is more likely to increase a child's motivation, attention, and participation than a boring one. But the benefits may be relatively short-term, ending with completion of the task. My experience suggests that thoughtfully and systematically expanding a child's understanding of chores yields benefits that reach farther.

The experience of completing a given chore varies from one person to the next. For example, I have many friends who don't like to pull weeds. For me, pulling a weed is destructively satisfying; the longer the root, the greater the kick that I get from extracting a dandelion or hogweed from the ground! Whether a person enjoys pulling weeds or not, the result is identical. It's the experience that is different. For me, weeding is not a chore.

Do children with autism readily understand that? Saying, "Weeding is no chore!" is potentially confusing to a child who tends to interpret words at face value. It *is* a chore; after all, it's on the chore chart! It's clearer to use phrases like, "I love pulling weeds!" Just as, "Andy, you sure love chores that use water!" accomplishes the same thing. Routinely pairing the word "chore" with positive experiences - *when applicable* - creates a broader, more accurate understanding of the concept, and balances the negative reputation associated with the term.

The words that we use with kids with autism matter. Re-thinking and rebooting the phrases that we routinely use can yield positive results. One example: Referring to a child as a “good helper.” The fact is, according to our goal, she is not a helper; she’s an apprentice. A helper helps. An apprentice learns skills to master a task. A Social Story explaining what an apprentice is, and consistent use of the term, is in line with the purpose and importance of the activity.

A Family Chore Chart That Works, Too!

Parents have used charts to assign and monitor chore completion for decades. Many of us have firsthand experience with chore charts as children and as adults! A chart structures the process and illustrates expectations. Children refer to the chart, identify the tasks assigned to them, complete them, and check (or “tick” in the United Kingdom) them off. We have a tendency, though, to use the chart formats of our past without re-thinking how they may be improved.

Children with autism are prone to interpret and respond to information or activities from a sincere and disarmingly unique point of view. A successful chore chart will reflect an understanding of how children with autism think and learn, with a format that reinforces the concepts and skills that lead to interdependence.

What follows is a list of ideas to consider when designing a chart for a family with autism:



1. The chart lists everyone in the home and their chores.

This daily chore chart includes Dad, Mom, other adults in the home, in addition to adolescents and children. If the dog is a trained service animal with a role in completing one or more household tasks, she’s there, too. It’s not just kids running this home! The chart is a clear and reassuring reminder that everyone contributes.

2. The chart is in the shape of a house with a yard.



Daily household chores are a part of every home. Reinforce that idea with a chart in the shape of a house. Divide the home into rooms, with a small picture representing each chore. Split Velcro stickers between small photos of each family member and alongside each task. Chores for the following day are assigned each evening by placing family member photos near each person’s assigned task(s). As a chore is completed the next day, the photo is removed and placed in a holding area for re-placement.

3. There may be more than one chart.

Use additional charts for larger, less frequent chores. In this case, sub-tasks are listed in sequence so a child can see how their contribution fits into the bigger picture. Doing the laundry is an example. In sequence from top to bottom, the chart lists who gathers the laundry, sorts it, places it into the machine, starts the machine, transfers it to the dryer, folds it, and distributes it! As mentioned above, parents are on the chart alongside their tasks.

A child's point of view holds the keys to making a chart autism-friendly and meaningful. They are the ideas that stop us in our tracks and "make so much sense" that we wonder, "Why didn't I think of that?"

Social Stories About Chores

A goal of interdependence impacts how we develop a Social Story. I've included, "[Our Family Does Chores](#)," as an example. The Story defines and describes household chores. As with every Story, there were several decisions to make. I selected words and phrasing likely to work harder to build the concept of chores, for example:

- I debated about the title, considering "Our Family Does Chores," "My Family Does Chores," "I Am Learning About Chores," and "My Chores at Home." I opted for "Our Family Does Chores," to emphasize the concept of families and what makes them work. For some children, especially those who are younger, I would use "My Family Does Chores" instead.
- Following that thinking, the plural "we" is used in place of "I" throughout this Story. Again, the first-person perspective may be easier for some children to understand.
- To help define "chores," I used a list of three examples. Instead of stating "doing laundry" or "making dinner," I decided to describe the function, meaning, and value of each task first, followed by how it is referred to by family members.

My only frustration with this project was time! There are so many potential Social Story topics! I hope this project provides a starting – or restarting – block to household chores, charts, and coordinating Stories!

The autism factor sharpens our goal. When it comes to chores, it shifts everything from the philosophy that ensures our resolve, the words that we use day-to-day, the charts that we create, and the Social Stories that we write.

Thank you for being a part of Carol's Club. I wish you all the best. As with every project, feel free to contact me anytime with comments or questions at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com.

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