



# A Broom of One's Own

It doesn't have to be a chore getting your kids to help out in the kitchen, in the garden, around the house. Here's how—and why.

BY CATHERINE NEWMAN



**My son has never leafed through** *Martha Stewart*

*Weddings*. He doesn't care one whit that his newly invented "pinwheel rollups" are a commotion of cheese and tortilla rather than the dainty spirals one might imagine. All the boy cares about is that he's made a snack for himself and his little sister. "Ta da!"

Kids want to help—or can be made to want to, at least, with a bit of finagling on the part of savvy grown-ups. When I visit the Amherst Montessori School, just down the road from us, it's snack time there too, and the youngest preschoolers are studying bananas like rocket science. One tiny girl in dark pigtails tries to wrangle one out of its peel, and the naked fruit skids to the floor like an eel. She opens her hand, and her fingers are spackled with banana pulp. Once she gets it onto the cutting board, the banana's remains are sliced, mounded into a bowl, and devoured with relish.

This "I can do it myself" lesson extends

beyond snack time: Children from 18 months old to just under 3 cheerfully hang dish towels and sweep the floor, and down the hall, in the classroom for kids up to age 5, dishes are being washed and silver polished. Adult caregivers mill around, of course, demonstrating a new task or clarifying a familiar one, untangling one boy from an apron's Velcro tentacles and offering encouragement. But their real work has been in the setup, and now they stay out from underfoot. The kids are doing their own thing, and because nobody has alerted them to the fact that housework is drudgery, it's not.

"From the time you're tiny until you're old, you need to be needed," the teacher, Alice Charland, explains, gesturing from the snack table to the low sink where a boy is resolutely scrubbing dishes. "It's what makes you feel empowered. It's what makes you a person."

Of course, these same empowered little people just might arrive home and promptly orchestrate a whining medley of chaos and

**Tip: Foster Independence**

At the NewPath Montessori School in Santa Monica, CA, teachers put the clothesline at a height where Mikayla, Sahil, and Helena can hang towels all by themselves. They also provided a kid-sized broom for Gillian (far left). At home, you can keep not only toys but also snacks and kid-safe cleaning supplies on low shelves. And have a step stool handy—for hard-to-reach cookies.







### Tip: Be Patient, Be Flexible

When you're not rushed or stressed, you can take time to make kids feel good about helping. Let them crack eggs for Saturday breakfast or chop herbs for Sunday dinner. Offer choices: "Would you rather put out the napkins or line up the silverware?" At left, Hudson cuts carrots—slowly, deliberately, but with plenty of time to finish before snack.

lethargy. The group culture of a classroom no doubt helps kids to help—a child notices that the other children are doing chores, and wants to take part.

Still, you can Tom Sawyer your children into pitching in with tasks at home too if you tap into your kids' particular passions: the dirt of the garden; the wet of the sink; the joy of dumping (beans into a pot, weeds into a wheelbarrow) or sorting (dirty laundry or clean silverware); the soothing pleasure of repetition (sweeping, slicing, dusting). Not to mention the happy imagining that every recipe begins: "Take one stick of softened butter and poke your thumb into it, then plunge your hand into the flour canister before bending down to tickle the cat." The

path to independence is neither straight nor especially tidy.

The philosophy that a child's independence can and should be fostered may be most distinctly realized in Montessori schools, but obviously it's not unique to them. It happens in countless classrooms, including at our local Waldorf school, where the overarching pedagogy differs and the children are more likely to sport woolen leggings and names like Aura or Winter. Here I watch two small kids washing dishes with much laughter and play. When they experiment with splash-splashing broad puddles onto the floor, a passing teacher simply hands them a dry dish towel—I make a mental note, here, of the absence of an exasperated sigh—and they

### Cool Tools for tots



Looking for a way to share the load? Let your child fill a **small-sized laundry basket** from the dryer, carry it to her room, then sort her own socks (\$8 at [magiccabin.com](http://magiccabin.com)).

Kids can clean windows, counters, even your car—safely—with **Mrs. Meyer's natural spray cleaners**, shown in lemon verbena and geranium (\$5 at [mrsmeyers.com](http://mrsmeyers.com)).

With a **small dustpan and brush**, your big kid can clear rice puffs from under baby sister's high chair (\$30 at [magiccabin.com](http://magiccabin.com); set also includes broom and dust mop).



### Tip: Make It Real—and Fun

Kids know when you're just giving them a keep-busy task. But "real" and "fun" are not mutually exclusive. Dance while you sweep, make up jokes while you plant peas, or use tongs to put away MegaBloks. In the Montessori classroom, where the philosophy is that beauty inspires, dishwashing is audaciously real—as in, china plates in children's hands.

wipe it up. Despite such diversions and giggling, what do you know? The dishes get washed. Not that the word *sterile* leaps to mind. Not that the teachers aren't grateful they get to go home and pull clean wine glasses from the dishwasher before opening a nice chilled

chardonnay. Not that children's joy precisely translates into cleanliness. But the dishes are clean enough.

There's nothing magic going on. There are the right tools for the job (small, specific, functional). There are tasks organized around a child's

size, skills, and interests. There's patience in the teaching of work skills and habits, and sufficient time to get the job done. And above all, there are occasions to rise to.

I confess that I don't bake spelt bread with my kids, like the Waldorf students, or let my children suds up the good crystal, like the Montessori ones. And sometimes I have to remind myself that before he pierced his ear and got all hunky and useful, Mr. Clean was probably lying on his parents' linoleum floor whining, "Can't you just do it yourself?" But there are plenty of opportunities for kids to show what they can do—and they may surprise you by doing it. My thirsty toddler would prefer to pour herself a drink from the small pitcher than wait for me to wait on her, and when she cries over her diaper change, I ask her to please do me a *huge* favor and get a wipe out of the box—and her mood almost always changes from flailing

**A mechanical carpet sweeper** is old-fashioned, but it's a silent alternative to the vacuum and your kids may even ask to clean the rug (\$25 at [for-small-hands.com](http://for-small-hands.com)).

**A diminutive wheelbarrow** lets your strong helper cart away weeds, dirt, lawn debris, the family cat . . . (\$40 at [for-small-hands.com](http://for-small-hands.com)).



## Choose the Right Job for the Right Age

Cheryl Roberts, director of education at the Gesell Institute of Human Development, describes what "meaningful" means, in terms of children's work: "It's work that is interesting and challenging without being too difficult; work that has tangible results; work that offers accomplishments that are satisfying." She helped us sort out the best jobs for different ages:

### 12-month-olds "Great imitators."

**Characteristic:** Newfound mobility  
**Skill:** Grasp and release

#### Good jobs:

- Picking up toys to drop in a bin
- Smoothing bed covers, sweeping—by imitating

### 18-month-olds "Can't do everything they think they can."

**Characteristics:** Problem solving; new attention span  
**Skills:** Strength and coordination

#### Good jobs:

- Serving from a tray
- Watering a garden, washing produce
- Helping to feed or groom a pet
- Using a mechanical carpet sweeper

misery to solemn pride. Ditto my 6-year-old, who is often frantic before dinner, flaking apart like a piecrust while I'm stuck stirring at the stove. If I give him a job—a real job, like washing the lettuce or pulling herb leaves from their stems—he tends to settle into happy concentration. Instead of feeling needy, he now feels needed.

Helping out builds more than self-confidence. So many tasks hone the very abilities young children are already working on: concentration, fine motor skills, and hand-eye coordination, to name a few. But they'll inevitably work on more abstract skills as well, such as discernment ("If I pour too much, it will spill over") and logical cause and effect ("If I spill it, I'll need to wipe it up with a sponge"). Not to mention patience, both theirs and your own. If your child skips toward a task as eagerly as Laura Ingalls Wilder with her milking pail, only to launch suddenly into a personal remake of *The*

*Exorcist*? Well, remind yourself that she's still learning valuable lessons. And so are you.

Lessons about cooperation and reciprocity, for instance. One day my 6-year-old asked, "How come you ask me to help with *your* jobs, but you always tell me to put my toys away by myself because 'that's a mess that you made'?" I felt like one of those cartoon characters clearing his head—*boi-oi-oi!*—with a noisy shake. "Good question!" And so I've quieted the "Put away your toys!" injunction, since it seems to make the kids feel like they're being punished for playing. Instead, I try to teach them chores that will benefit all of us—even if our "clean" windows look like they've been wiped with frosting and our "clean" salad is like an Orwellian torture of grit and wetness. Their father and I squint through the smeared glass, crunch through the spinach, smile, and thank the children kindly. We're in it for the long haul here.

Participating in the work of the household shows young children what it means to be part of a community. It nurtures their sense of themselves as able, independent, and esteemed members of the family. I hold out hope too that as they grow up, working side by side with us may afford kids the kind of quality time and easy intimacy that can be hard to come by these days. Our brooding teenagers may be more likely to share their troubles during a companionable front-step corn shucking than under our worrying, intense gaze. And when they're adults? Well, a whole generation of husbands and wives will surely drop to their knees to thank us. T

**Catherine Newman is the author of *Waiting for Birdy*, a memoir of her pregnancy with her daughter. If she writes a sequel anytime soon, it'll likely be called *Waiting for Birdy to Finish Folding the Laundry*.**

## Cool Tools for tots



With the dizzying whirl of a mini midway ride, a **salad spinner** washes and dries greens. A retired one can moonlight as a spin-art machine (\$25 at [oxo.com](http://oxo.com)).

A **squat glass vase** with a wire grid makes beautiful arrangements of even the most raggedy array of short-stemmed wildflowers (\$4 at [forsmallhands.com](http://forsmallhands.com)).

## The Right Job . . .

### 2-year-olds

**"Routine and ritual are very important."**

#### Characteristics:

Increased hand-eye coordination and concentration

**Skills:** Following directions, sorting

#### Good jobs:

- Spreading peanut butter or cheese
- Dusting, sweeping, wiping a counter, washing windows
- Sorting laundry, silverware, toys
- Washing, stirring, mashing food

### 3-year-olds

**"Work is still play."**

#### Characteristic:

More awareness of significance of help

**Skills:** Sorting and arranging

#### Good jobs:

- Setting the table
- Using kitchen gadgets, with supervision: sifter, rolling pin, cheese grater, mortar and pestle
- Planting, weeding, raking, digging, arranging garden flowers
- Pouring tasks

### 4-year-olds

**"Love anything new and relish their independence."**

#### Characteristics:

Increased precision; increased sense of responsibility

**Skills:** Making things; taking things apart and putting them back together W

### Tip: Be Specific

In both tasks and praise, be precise. Try “Can you please peel this carrot until it’s bright orange?” or “Can you please put your blocks into the black box so I can vacuum?” And you’ll get a broader smile from your silver polisher with “Look how shiny you got it!” than with a generic “Good job!” Here, Julia fills a request for two equal servings of cranberry juice.

### Good jobs:

- Using still more gadgets: peeler, pitter, slicer, food mill, juicer, whisk, even—with close supervision—a true paring knife
- Hanging wash on a line, neatly folding dry clothes
- Simple, supervised woodworking

### 5-year-olds

“Like to please.”

#### Characteristics:

Sense of confidence; expanded curiosity about how things in the house work

**Skills:** Understanding what a job is; tackling even uninteresting jobs

#### Good jobs:

- Big supervised jobs, such as vacuuming or taking out trash
- Behind-the-scenes jobs, such as removing the vacuum bag or coming along to the dump

### 6-year-olds

“Full of energy and enthusiasm.”

#### Characteristic:

Independence

**Skills:** Beginning reading and math

#### Good jobs:

- Measuring—for recipes, pet food, laundry soap
- Reading to a younger sibling
- Noticing what needs to be done, and helping out

**A small serving tray** enables your child to offer snacks and drinks to family members—and carry away big tips from all his satisfied customers (\$9 for two at Target stores).

**A cherry pitter** makes cherries just right for pies, olives just right for snacks. Count fruits and pits; the numbers should match (\$10 at differentdrummers kitchen.com).

