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Boys Mow Lawns, Girls Do Dishes: Are Parents Perpetuating the Chore Wars?

By

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I've always considered myself tuned-in to the gender politics of the Chore Wars -- the household battles between husbands and wives over who does what at home.

Imagine my surprise when I realized I'm guilty of perpetuating this conflict into the next generation. While reporting on the topic, I saw that I myself expect different things of my son, 16, and my daughter, 18: I want him to handle more fix-it jobs, while my daughter does more cleaning.

The latest research suggests I'm not alone. The way parents are divvying up and paying kids for chores suggests this is one family battle that will extend well into the next generation and beyond.

A nationwide study by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research shows boys ages 10 through 18 are more likely than girls to be getting paid for doing housework -- even though boys spend an average 30% less time doing chores. Boys are as much as 10 to 15 percentage points more likely than girls at various ages to be receiving an allowance for doing housework, says the institute's newly completed analysis of data on 3,000 children ages 10 through 18.

Boys may be handling more of the kinds of chores that are regarded as a job that should be paid, such as lawnmowing, speculates Frank Stafford, the University of Michigan economics professor heading the research. Chores such as dishwashing or cooking, often regarded as routine and done free, may fall more often to girls. (The analysis is based on aggregate samples, and doesn't compare treatment of siblings within individual families.)

Also, girls ages six through 17 perform two hours more of housework each week than boys, the institute found. That echoes previous studies showing a similar gap, and mirrors an even bigger gulf between adult women's and men's housework time. Women now do about 19.4 hours a week to men's 9.7 hours, according to research by Suzanne Bianchi, a sociology professor at the University of Maryland, and others. "Girls hang around with their moms, boys with their dads, and they follow the patterns they grow up with," says Constance Gager, assistant professor, social and family dynamics, at Arizona State University.

Like me, many parents are unconscious of any gender gap among their own kids. Ann Barlow regards her family as gender-neutral, saying she and her husband treat their son, 13, and their daughter, 16, pretty much alike. "I don't think we discriminate," the San Ramon, Calif., mother. But she acknowledges that they do different tasks.

"We stick my son with taking out the garbage," she says. "I never even thought about it. It's just, 'Chris, take out the garbage.' " Her son also cleans the garage and handles household repairs more often than her daughter. And her daughter spends about an hour more each week doing housework -- three, compared with two by her son.

He uses humor to slip off the hook, Ms. Barlow says. "He'll be the first guy to weasel out of his chores. He'll say, 'Oh, I dropped a plate, you probably don't want me to handle those any more.' "

Some research shows that as adults, women are content doing more housework if they perceive the setup as fair. If a husband is working longer hours outside the home, for example, wives may willingly shoulder more chores.

But with kids, in addition to doing more housework, daughters are spending more time than sons performing paid jobs -- 1.9 hours a week for girls, vs. 1.3 hours for boys, Dr. Bianchi and others report in a 2006 book, "Changing Rhythms of American Family Life." Dr. Gager, who found a similar pattern in a 2004 study, likens these girls to "supermoms -- they're superkids who do it all."

In many busy households, housework simply isn't a high priority any more; couples' combined housework time is down 25% from the 1960s, Dr. Bianchi says. In the resulting war against dustballs, many families value pragmatism over gender politics. Raoul and Jackie Pascual acknowledge that chores haven't been evenly distributed among their three children. A daughter, 22 and living at home, has always handled more cleaning than their son, now 19, or another daughter, 14. Their son takes out the trash and helps with such jobs as assembling furniture, says Ms. Pascual, of South Pasadena, Calif. But the Pascuals aren't concerned. "It doesn't make a difference" who does what, Mr. Pascual says, "as long as it's done."

Housework is a problem at Mike Grandin's house, but gender politics are the least of his worries. His daughter, 18, cooks meals and helps out more at home than his son, 15. But neither clean up messes to Mr. Grandin's satisfaction. The San Francisco stockbroker says he winds up doing a lot of the dishes and tidying up while his kids stay busy with extracurricular activities, studying and jobs. His response is gender-blind: "I come down just as hard on either one when they leave a mess."