REAL WORK · AN EVIDENCE-BASED ESSAY FOR PARENTS

The Play Kitchen Can Stay. The Real One Doesn’t Have to Wait.

Results topped preschoolers’ reasons for the real thing; older kids may want work that counts.

14-minute read Every figure sourced below By George Weber Nothing here is for sale

You know this kitchen, or one close to it.

It is 5:40 on a Tuesday. The pasta water will not boil. Someone has practice at 6:30, and the onions are starting to smell as if they might burn.

Behind you, a chair scrapes across the floor. Your three-year-old is pushing it to the counter, both hands flat on the seat, all of her weight behind it. She climbs up and holds out a hand.

“I help.”

She wants the knife. Then the spoon. Then the whole pot. You give her a bowl and a whisk with nothing to whisk, and she whisks it hard for almost a minute. Then she reaches for the pot again. You lift her down and say the sentence every parent knows by heart: “Let me do it, sweetheart.”

Your ten-year-old is on the couch. You ask him to set the table. There is a pause long enough to hear.

“Why do I have to?”

A minute later, from the doorway: “What do I get?”

Dinner happens. Bedtime happens. And somewhere around ten, with the dishwasher running, a thought arrives that you did not invite. He used to be the one pushing the chair. When did that stop?

Under it, quieter: *Did I do that? All those years of “let me do it”?*

One child wants in. The other wants to know what is in it for him. Between them sit about seven years, and a question nobody has asked you to answer.

The kitchen at 5:40

Start with what is plain. The small one’s help makes dinner slower. The big one’s help comes with a negotiation. And all of it lands on the same adult, at the hour of the day with the least give in it.

That is the part anyone could see. The part underneath is heavier. It is the worry that you trained the helping out of him, one rushed evening at a time. That the eager three-year-old is a phase, the bargaining ten-year-old is simply who children become, and somewhere back there you missed your chance.

Before that worry goes any further, look at how a week like yours is laid out. You will know it.

A child’s day runs in separate rooms. There is a building for learning, for most of the day. There is a place for play: a playroom, a park, a screen. And the real work of the house, the cooking and fixing and caring for people, gets done by adults in the gaps. Fast. Before the bus, and after practice.

Those gaps are the hours with a clock on them. At 7:15 in the morning and 5:40 at night, “let me do it” is the sane answer. It is the answer that gets everyone fed. So the real work of the house ends up in the hours when there is no time to teach it.

One close study saw something that fits this picture, though it did not measure the reason. A team at UCLA spent days inside 30 middle-class, two-job families in Los Angeles, each with a child of eight to ten. Most of the children, they wrote, spent “surprisingly little time helping around the house.”

Nobody sat down and chose that for your children. It grew up around good intentions and a crowded clock. It is the design, and it says nothing bad about you.

But the design does not answer the question that kept you up at ten. For that, there is research, and some of it was done in homes.

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The belief that protects childhood

First, the belief that put the play kitchen in the corner. It is a loving one.

> Childhood is for play. Real work can wait.

It is a good belief. Most of us hold it because we want our children to have something we know is short. Slow mornings. Afternoons that belong to them. A few years before the world starts asking them to be useful.

There are real reasons behind it. Some of us remember a childhood, our own or a sibling's, that carried too much too early. Researchers have seen it too. A 2024 review of studies of teenagers, most of them in Mexican-American, Latino and Asian American families, warns that heavy family duties can crowd out school and friends. In one diary study of 385 Mexican-American teenagers, helping the family went with more substance use, not less, in homes where parent–child conflict was high. Helping is not good in every amount, or in every home.

And play deserves its full due. Pretend play, the tea party and the cardboard rocket and the doctor kit, is one of the great inventions of early childhood. Even the researchers who asked preschoolers whether they would rather pretend or do the real thing begin one of their sentences this way: "Although pretend play is a wonderful activity…"

So the first half of the belief stays. Childhood is for play. Nothing below argues with that.

The second half carries a quiet assumption, and it is easy to miss. It assumes that what draws a small child to the stove is the fun of it, and only that, and a play kitchen gives her that just as well. So nothing she wants is lost by waiting. Teach her the real thing later, when she is old enough to be useful and there is finally time.

And by ten, the doorway seems to settle it. If children wanted in on real work, why would he need a deal?

Our days are built on that assumption. The play kitchen sits in the corner. The real one is off-limits at 5:40. The assumption deserves a fair test, and so does the question from the doorway.

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The helper nobody asked

Start with toddlers.

In a well-known set of experiments published in 2006, the psychologists Felix Warneken and Michael Tomasello brought 24 toddlers, all about 18 months old, into a lab in Germany. An adult the child had just met would drop something and fail to reach it, or struggle with a cupboard he could not get open.

Nearly all of them helped at least once: 22 of the 24. They picked up what he had dropped, or opened the cupboard for him. They did it almost at once, in about five seconds, before the adult had even looked at them or said a word. Nobody asked them. Nobody thanked them or rewarded them.

And they were not simply grabbing at whatever fell. In six of the ten tasks, the toddlers helped reliably more often when the adult truly needed help than in a matching moment when he did not. Even a child who can barely talk was reading what the grown-up was trying to get done.

These were short lab tasks, not housework. But they show something about the starting point. Very early, many small children move toward a person who is trying to get something done.

Why they do it is still argued over. Some researchers think it is, at root, a toddler's wish to take part in whatever the adults are doing. In another lab study, two-year-olds seemed as satisfied when someone else helped as when they helped themselves. What seemed to matter was that the need got met.

If those lab findings carry to your counter, the small child on the chair is not craving chores. She is paying attention to you, and to what you are trying to get done. So, once, was the boy on the couch.

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At home, the help is real, and so is the mess

Labs are tidy. Kitchens are not. So researchers have also gone into homes.

Research that asked mothers and filmed families at home found most babies "helping" from around their first birthday, often with someone encouraging or thanking them. In a survey of 528 American families with children between one and four, parents were asked about nine everyday chores: laundry, sweeping, dishes, cooking, tidying up and the rest. By their parents' report, one-year-olds joined in on fewer than three of the nine, on average. Four-year-olds, a different group of children, joined in on more than five.

And most of those parents said what you would say. Their child's eager help is sometimes no help at all. One parent wrote: "Yes it is usually unhelpful and makes everything take longer, but she loves learning."

The researchers titled their paper "Happily unhelpful."

If you have ever thought the help was no help, you are with most of the parents in that survey, not outside them. That goes for seven years ago, too, when the boy on the couch was the one pushing the chair. "Let me do it" is what that thought sounds like out loud at 5:40. The slower dinner is the true cost of letting a small child in, and it is paid in minutes, at the hours that have the fewest.

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By six or seven, two pictures

This is where your ten-year-old comes in.

In a study published in 2022, researchers interviewed 64 American mothers from two communities: Mexican-heritage families and middle-class European American families. Some families had two- and three-year-olds;

different families, a dozen in each community, had six- and seven-year-olds.

Most of the two- and three-year-olds were described as eager helpers, pitching in on their own, though the Mexican-heritage toddlers did so more.

By six or seven, the picture had split. In the Mexican-heritage families, children were usually still described that way. In the middle-class European American families, they mostly helped, in the authors' words, "under adult management and control, in contractual arrangements."

That can sound like your doorway. But the arrow could as easily run the other way: parents may reach for deals because a child has started to resist. The study shows a pattern, not a cause, and it is not a ranking of anyone's parenting.

So, to the question that arrived with the dishwasher running. No study we found tested whether saying "let me do it" to a toddler changes what a child does at ten. What the UCLA team did find is company for your son, at least in those 30 two-job Los Angeles families: children in 22 of the 30 homes regularly tried to negotiate, resist or refuse the jobs they were given.

The study cannot say what caused it, and common is not the same as harmless. But in those homes, the bargaining was the usual pattern, not one family's lapse. Nothing here says you closed a door.

Still, deals were not the pattern everywhere.

Barbara Rogoff, an author of the six-or-seven study, has a name for one way of learning. She calls it "Learning by Observing and Pitching In." She describes it as especially common in many Indigenous-heritage communities of the US, Mexico and Central America, and adds that it matters in every community. Children are included in the family's real work, and learn by watching it and contributing to it, rather than being kept to the side and managed.

Two studies, from two separate teams, describe what that can look like past the toddler years. In one, many six- to eight-year-olds from an Indigenous-heritage community in Guadalajara, Mexico, were reported to cook, run errands or look after younger siblings on their own initiative. The same children were often described as having plenty of time for free play.

In the other, the same UCLA team set its Los Angeles families beside families in the Peruvian Amazon. Young Matsigenka children took on many tasks, many of them on their own. In Los Angeles, no child routinely took on a household job without being asked.

None of this is a recipe to copy from another family's culture. It shows that, in other places, the story has gone another way.

At his age, and a little after

Back to the couch. The evidence at your son's age is thinner than for toddlers, and most of it is correlational, but it is not empty.

In two studies from the 1990s of nine- to fourteen-year-olds, the chores that went with more concern for others at home were the routine jobs done for the whole family. Chores a child did only for himself did not.

A little older, in a diary study of American teenagers of 14 and 15, helping the family was generally not stressful. It went with more happiness, mostly through a sense of doing their part.

One small study heard from children his age directly. In one Mexican city, sixteen nine- and ten-year-olds were asked about their family's housework, and half of them came from an Indigenous-heritage community, the kind of community where, in the studies above, children kept pitching in. Almost all sixteen said that children want to contribute to it, and they regarded that work as "the shared responsibility of everyone in the family." That is what they said children want, not a count of their own chores.

The psychologist Andrew Fuligni, who studies teenagers, argues that the wish to contribute may matter even more in adolescence, as children become "capable of making contributions of consequence."

To hear children choose between the real thing and pretend, and say why, you have to go back to the age your daughter is about to be.

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Ask them

A team of researchers at the University of Virginia did the simplest thing. They asked.

They showed 100 American preschoolers, aged three to six, pictures of nine activities, from washing dishes and cutting vegetables to riding a horse and eating ice cream, each in a real version and a pretend one. Would you rather really cut vegetables, say, or pretend to? Writing for general readers, the researchers summed it up: "although 3-year-olds were 50-50, by age 4, children strongly preferred real activities." From four, the preference held steady through six. When children did pick pretend, it was often because they thought they weren't able, or weren't allowed.

Pretend kept its own ground, too. In a follow-up, three- and four-year-olds still preferred to *play* the roles, the chef or the firefighter, rather than take the real ones. The researchers' sentence that began with praise for pretend play goes on just as carefully, and names those roles as its one exception: "Although pretend play is a wonderful activity, it appears that much of the time, most children do not prefer it to real equivalents…" Pretending is not going anywhere.

The follow-up also asked the question that matters most here: why did children want the real version? Many simply liked it better. But the most common reason, both in the follow-up and in the original 100, was practical: the real thing actually gets something done. Sometimes the result was their own, and sometimes it was for someone else, like the child who wanted to really clean up a room "so you don't have to do it." As the authors read it, "Really preparing food leads to yummy outcomes, and caring for babies and engaging in household chores helps the family." Some of those real results were treats a child got to eat, and some were help for someone else; carrying the finding over to the work of the house is our step, not theirs. A play kitchen can give a child some of the fun. It cannot give her a real result.

Let them play, and let them in.

Childhood is for play. It is also for being let in on the real work of the house, at the size of the child, next to someone who knows how.

That holds at the doorway, too, on our reading of the studies at his age, which point, in small, correlational ways, toward work done for the whole family. So when he asks "What do I get?", he may partly be asking whether the job counts.

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What letting them in could look like

What follows is our reasoning from the studies above, not a tested program. Every family will find its own size for it. At every age, the first teaching goes where the clock has some give: a slower afternoon, or one evening picked ahead of time, not the most rushed one of the week. And at every age, the job is made something the child is able to do and allowed to do, next to you.

For the small ones, it is the real version, made small. A real bowl of real batter. A real cloth for a real spill. Next to you, with the extra minutes counted in.

For six- to nine-year-olds, it is a whole job with a finish line someone uses. The table set for people who will eat at it. The salad the family actually eats. Something carried to a neighbor who is expecting it.

For ten- to fourteen-year-olds, it is work the family would miss if it went undone. A dinner he plans and cooks on the same night each week. A repair done with a real tool he was taught to use. Real enough that it matters. Safe enough that a mistake can be fixed. The first one can be small and his own pick, and the first try is allowed to go wrong. And when he asks at the doorway what he gets, one answer to try is what the job is for, and who is counting on it.

And the playroom stays exactly where it is.

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The kitchen, a year on

It is 5:40 on a Wednesday, a year on. You picked Wednesday back in September, because it is the one night nobody has practice. The pasta water still takes forever. That part did not change.

Your daughter is four now. She stands on the step stool at the sink, sleeves pushed up past her elbows, scrubbing potatoes with a brush meant for her hand. There is water on the counter, on the floor, on the front of her shirt. You put a towel down at her feet before she started. You knew.

Your son is eleven. Wednesday is his dinner. He chose it on Sunday, wrote the list himself, and checked the pantry before you went to the store. The first time, the rice was crunchy and the sauce had too much salt. Everyone ate it. He made it again the next Wednesday, and it was better.

Tonight he is cutting onions with the good knife, the way you showed him: fingers curled, slow. He is crying from the onions and pretending he isn’t. You are at the table with the mail, which is the strangest part. Your hands are free.

He still sighs about setting the table some nights. Some weeks he still asks what he gets. He is eleven.

At 6:10 he calls everyone in, and he watches his sister take the first bite. She says the potatoes are hers. He lets her have that.

After dinner, she goes to the play kitchen in the corner of the living room. She stirs a plastic pot with great seriousness and brings you a plastic carrot on a plate. You eat it, slowly, because it is play, and play is hers too.

The play kitchen in the corner, and the real one at the counter. Both of them are hers now.

And the boy who asked what he gets has not asked it about Wednesday in a while. Wednesday is his.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Who wrote this, and why

My name is George Weber. My wife, Jaclyn, and I have five children, all under eleven.

My second son is Jordy. When he was seven, we sat at the kitchen table after dinner, and I asked him to explain why reading and discussion were so hard. This is a boy who will stand at a workbench for hours without looking up. He taught his little brother and sister to ride a bike, and then to use a screw gun. He builds things I could not build. That night he kept his head down. Twice, all he gave me was “I don’t know.” Then he said it:

> “I’m just not good at school.”

He was not describing a difficulty. He was describing himself.

Here is the part I would rather not say. I had seen it coming for a while. That night I was interrogating a seven-year-old for a reason he did not have, when what he was really carrying was shame. And I kept sending him, because I could not see what else to do.

For years, Jaclyn had told me the truth about the other option. She would not become the entire staff of a school with five children in it, and if we did this, I would have to free at least fifteen hours a week. She was right on both counts, and I could not find the hours. So I know the arithmetic in these essays from the inside.

Before this work, I made more than $4 million building six personal-training studios. I have stepped away from them. I have given the next twenty years to two things: helping parents make the right choice for their own children, whatever that choice turns out to be, and helping lead what I believe is a coming change in how families educate their children.

I am not an academic. The research in these essays belongs to the people named in the sources. My job was to read it carefully and tell you what it says, and what it does not. That is why every essay ends with what it does not claim.

I wrote them for the parent I was that night at the kitchen table.

George Weber

FATHER OF FIVE

READ NEXT

Every Program Says It Works. Ask What It Was Compared To

If you are weighing programs that say they are built around real work and real choices, the next essay asks which of their claims have been tested

WHAT THIS ARTICLE DOES NOT CLAIM

- No study we found shows that real work makes children learn more, do better in school, or succeed later. A popular claim that early chores predict adult success did not trace to a study we could read. Two chores studies did turn up: a large US study of nearly 10,000 children (kindergarten chores went with somewhat higher third-grade self-ratings, after allowing for family income and parents' education) and a 2022 survey of 207 parents of children aged 5 to 13, mostly in Australia, read only through CHADD's *Attention* magazine and the British Psychological Society's Research Digest. Both show links, not causes, and neither is used above.
- No study we found followed the same children from toddler helping to later helping. The six-or-seven split compares different children, by the reports of 24 mothers, twelve in each community. Every cultural comparison here is interviews, reports or fieldwork in communities that differ in many ways, and none shows a cause. The Mexico and Mexican-heritage studies come from one research group; the Los Angeles and Matsigenka work is a separate team.
- The lab studies of toddlers are short tasks with small samples in Germany. Why toddlers help is unsettled. One more small experiment from the same lab (36 toddlers, one session, no independent repeat we found) found that a toy given for helping lowered later helping, while thanks did not. It says nothing about allowances or ten-year-olds; a separate essay on rewards and grades takes up that question.
- Real work has limits nobody disputes. Federal law lets 14- and 15-year-olds work only limited hours in certain safe jobs, and keeps everyone under 18 out of hazardous work. States can be stricter; household chores are not employment.
- The real-or-pretend studies measured choices, not learning, in small US samples, mostly white and middle class. The nine activities mixed chores with treats and outings, so the step from "real activities" to "the real work of the house" is ours. Across all 100 children, the real version won about two choices in three, by our arithmetic from the authors' conference poster; the full paper was not read. 38 of the 100 attended Montessori schools and chose real somewhat more often; the others chose real about three times in five. That gap is not a measure of any school. The follow-up's main "practical" reason covered both getting a real result and helping someone. It was the most common reason in every child sample the follow-up reports, but not the only one: in the original 100, it was given 45% of the time, and simply liking the real version a little less, about two times in five, from the follow-up's own table. Because three-year-olds were split, the three-year-old's pull toward the real thing here rests on the helping studies.
- No study we found asked children of ten to thirteen the real-or-pretend question. The evidence at the son's age is small, correlational or read at abstract level, and "whether the job counts" is our

reading across it, not a finding. The 1990s studies (sample size and country not given in the summary we read) found a correlation, and it did not carry over to helping strangers. Fuligni's is an argument from a review, not a trial. In a 2020 survey of 1,301 American high schoolers, teens who felt needed and useful to family and friends reported better well-being, and that feeling came from both giving and receiving support. The Los Angeles count of 22 of 30 is by family, across all the children in those homes (aged 5 to 17), not broken down by age.

- These are studies of children in general, not of homeschooled children. Several were read at abstract level only, as marked in the sources.
- The kitchen at 5:40 and the kitchen a year on are composites; the second pictures what we suggest, not what any study found. The picture of a week laid out in separate rooms is ours, not a study's.

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