

Age-appropriate ways to teach kids the dignity of work at home

Everyone has talents that can be used to help the family maintain a home. In our work as a family maintaining a home, we are providing a healthy and clean space for us to learn, play and pray.

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) tells us that “work honors the Creator’s gifts and the talents received from him.” So roll up your kids’ sleeves and help them honor Jesus with a little elbow grease.

Five ways to make cleaning age-appropriate and fun

1. Give them a job they can do at their level

It’s no good trying to get a 3-year-old to clean the toilet. But a 3-year-old can take a damp sponge and scrub the floor. You can mark off a section of the floor with blue paint tape and have them “clean” it daily. Instilling any kind of work habit takes patience and many days of follow-through.

Depending on the kind of kitchen floor you have, you can let them play with play-doh, and then have them clean it up with warm water. Picking up tiny bits of play-doh is easy if you squish them together with a big chunk. Finding something like this that a young child can do easily will set them up for success with harder cleaning jobs later.

2. Let them fold the laundry

Sure, they probably know their colors and are whizzes at matching stripes and dots, and Marvel characters. This means that they can start to fold their own laundry.

Starting at age 5, I give my kids 25 cents a week when they can match their socks and underwear. The older kids may even move on to clothing origami, or the art of folding complicated things. This includes heavy blankets and comforters, and those puffy fitted sheets.

The concept of small monetary incentives for work teaches them the beginnings of responsibility and the dignity of work.

The catechism tells us that “everyone has the right of economic initiative; everyone should make legitimate use of his talents to contribute to the abundance that will benefit all and to harvest the just fruits of his labor.”

Though this idea is lost on the little ones, older children

will begin to understand that money earned can and should be used, at least in part, for providing for the family and the common good. They can save up to buy a book, or candy or birthday presents for siblings. Perhaps they can save up to buy baking ingredients and help provide a part of the meal.

3. Show them how to use a broom

Better yet, show them a series of brooms. Children can start with those small toy brushes and dustpans that are a staple of the dollar aisles. Even tiny brooms can build valuable skills.

Cleaning up popcorn messes, Cheerios, random dirt ... no job is too small to start teaching them how to sweep. When they are 8 years old and up, they can sweep out the garage, Swiffer the ceilings, and clean spiderwebs out of basement corners.

I'm a big believer in adding music to make the chores go faster. If your little ninja wants to wave the broom like a pretend Japanese katana, that's fine too ... after the chore is done.

Cleaning can be creative and fun, and with a little creative use of those talents, we are indeed giving glory to God. The [tradition of Catholic social teaching](#) shows us that "work should be the setting for this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God."

4. Don't complain about the dishes

[The Bible even says it](#), "if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat." Yup, no help in the kitchen, no food for you!

Kids love to eat. Therefore, they must take a turn at the dishes. Even the most recalcitrant teenager can usually be convinced to do a few dishes if there is something in it for them. They might like to cook or bake, and you could offer to buy them ingredients for their next stint on the "Great British Baking Show." Remind them that it is easier to cook if you clean as you go. If "cleanliness is next to godliness," then a clean kitchen is a blessing for everyone in the family.

Many adults absolutely hate doing dishes. But the kids are watching your behavior, so this may be an important chore to do together. The greater the struggle to overcome selfishness, the more redeeming the work can be. Teaching redemption through work is a reminder of Jesus' suffering for our salvation.

5. Give them the opportunity to impress you

An endless wellspring of creativity resides in each child, waiting to be tapped. Cleaning projects don't have to be labeled as such. Kids often come up with crazy ideas to clean on their own.

My kids' favorite random project is picking up pine needles from the Christmas tree. One child suggested putting the needles in toy dump trucks, and soon three kids each had a truck (or two!) in hand, seeing who could pick up the most. Making it a game often adds the right amount of drama to an otherwise boring chore.

And kids really want and need mom or dad's affirmation that they are doing something right. Encourage them to find ways to help you do what needs to be done, whatever that is.

From sanitizing screens with cotton balls and alcohol, to scrubbing out that post-tailgate party cooler, there is a job for everyone. Playtime, music and creativity can go a long way toward teaching kids that cleaning can be fun. Working together on a project builds character, and shows them that you, too, are striving to use your talents to increase holiness and share the burden.

"Dear Lord, as I am down on my hands and knees to clean, please lift up my prayers and help me teach my kids these valuable skills. Help me hold my temper when I am tired, and redirect my energy to where it is most needed. Thank you for giving us Holy Mary, your Mother who did not shy away from working with St. Anne. Bless our efforts. Amen."