



## Talking About

One of the greatest gifts you can give your kids is independence—and the expectation that they will, someday, grow up. This just may be why #adulting is trending.

By Catherine Hong

Over the years, my husband and I have spent a lot of time quibbling about how to load the dishwasher. He's of the thoroughly-rinse-it-all-off school. I'm staunchly in the camp of scrape-but-don't-rinse. (I mean, what's the point of a dishwasher?) We've also loudly debated the finer points of cereal bowl alignment. It's sad, I know, considering there are many more stimulating conversations we should be having after dinner.

But you know what's even sadder? Our realization a couple of years ago that our daughter, then 13, had no idea how to

load a dishwasher—not even the “wrong” way. One night, we asked her to have a go and the result was...well, let's just say it looked as though she had done the job blindfolded, after which the Bosch had been hit by a very localized earthquake. Turns out a child cannot learn to load the dishwasher simply via osmosis.

According to experts, my husband and I are not alone in our failure to teach this—and many other basic life skills—to our kids. Cooking simple meals, cleaning the bathroom, mowing the lawn and walking the dog are only a few of the tasks that,

just a generation ago, parents expected teens and tweens to shoulder—the very same chores that have eluded many of our own offspring. Fewer home ec classes in middle school and high school may be partly to blame. Wasn't it there that so many American kids once learned how to sew buttons and measure flour? But it's not just household chores that have dwindled away; it's self-reliance. When my son—who's in middle school—was at sleepaway camp, counselors trimmed the campers' fingernails!

And we've all heard complaints about millennials who stumble thorough life like oversized children—the ones who don't know how to stay on top of bills, or write thank-you notes, or solve work dramas without having to text their parents. (These are the same millennials who now enroll in “adulting classes” that aim to teach basic life skills like cooking, time management and budgeting.) As Julie Lythcott-Haims, Stanford University's former dean of freshmen, explained in her influential book *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*, this phenomenon of learned helplessness is mostly the result of parental over-involvement. Parents have absolved their kids of these responsibilities for a variety of reasons, she says. For some parents, it's about making their kids' lives easier or happier. For others, it might be about safety or ensuring the job is done properly. For still others, it's about getting ahead in the college arms race: They'd rather have their kids do SAT prep or cello practice than change the cat litter or scrub a lasagna pan.

“But probably more than anything it's about a parent's ego and a need to be needed,” Lythcott-Haims says. “Entwining their identities with their children's gives them a greater sense of purpose” that's ultimately harmful for the child. “When you are all up in your kids' business, you're depriving them of the experiences that forge a life,” she says. “If they don't develop these life skills, they lack

agency, which can lead to anxiety and depression.” In other words, we have to stop doing our kids’ chores—and it really *is* for their own good.

### Your Action Plan

Of course, getting your kids to pull their own weight is easier said than done. The first time you try to explain to your 13-year-old that they are going to be taking out the trash, you’ll surely hear some version of “Wait, that’s your job!” or “Why now?”

And they have a point: The earlier you train your kids to start doing simple chores, the less pushback you’ll receive. That may explain why the upcoming book *How to Be a Person: 65 Hugely Useful, Super-Important Skills to Learn Before You’re Grown Up* by Catherine Newman, is aimed at middle schoolers.

Your best move for pushing them toward a new everyday challenge/chore is to take a deep breath and explain that “kids need to learn how to do these things for themselves.” You can even

acknowledge that you made a mistake by not having had them pitch in all along. (“But don’t apologize too much, as it only undermines your authority!” Lythcott-Haims warns.) Beth Gagnon, a New Hampshire-based psychotherapist who works with kids and families, says she’s used the following words on her own offspring when they’ve balked: “My role is supervising, not doing.” This is also a

situation in which introducing rewards and privileges is perfectly appropriate, she adds. “After all, if your child is able to legally operate a car, they should be able to stay on top of their laundry. Tell them, ‘If you have a license to drive, you should have a license to dry.’”

While teaching a complicated task may seem daunting, a good rule is this basic three-step process: First, do the job *with* your kid, showing them how it’s done. Then, observe your kid performing the task. Finally, let them do it completely independently.

“Technology can be a great help,” Gagnon says. If you’re trying to get your kid to keep a calendar, it may come more naturally to them to use a phone app. And don’t underestimate the power of instructional

videos on YouTube. “It’s how kids learn these days, and it’s a great tool,” she says.

For parents hoping they can simply give college-bound kids a crash course in spin cycles and omelet-making two weeks before school starts, think again. A lot of these so-called “adulting” skills involve habit as well as planning

and organization. If your kid isn’t used to managing laundry, there’s a good chance they’ll realize too late that they’ve run out of clean underwear.

Kids don’t become adults overnight. It’s our job to start them on the path toward independence while they’re still young—however much patience (and tolerance for imperfectly washed cereal bowls) that may require.



## Teaching your kid to adult? It starts early.

With help from experts and parents we trust, we’ve put together these suggested guidelines for life skills by age. Don’t panic if your family isn’t exactly there yet. Every kid develops at a different rate.

### AGES 10 TO 12

- Stay home alone
- Load a dishwasher
- Cook simple foods (eggs, boxed mac and cheese)
- Clean the bathroom
- Take out the trash
- Use the washer and dryer
- Change bed sheets
- Use basic hand tools

### AGES 13 TO 15

- Clean most areas of the home
- Plan and prepare meals with several ingredients
- Take care of younger siblings
- Compare prices
- Understand banking concepts (the difference between a checking and savings account, how interest works)
- Plunge the toilet

### AGES 16 TO 18

- Fill a car with gas
- Change a tire
- Understand medicine labels and dosage
- Make appointments (dentist, haircut, orthodontist)
- Perform more sophisticated cleaning and maintenance chores (changing the vacuum cleaner bag, cleaning the stove)
- Fill out a job application
- Tip appropriately