

# Smooth Operations: Teaching Children with Special Needs to Help Out Around the House

By Shannon Kay, Ph.D., BCBA-D, May Institute

*Is there a parent anywhere who doesn't wish his or her children would help out more around the house? Probably not. But military families with one parent who may be deployed and one child who has special needs may be more motivated than most to find creative ways to engage children in day-to-day chores. The following article offers practical information and advice that will help you teach your child the skills he (or she) needs to contribute to the smooth operation of your household. More importantly, these skills will help him be successful in many other aspects of his life.*

**Q: Is it reasonable to expect young children with autism to do chores and help out around the house?**

**A:** Yes! It's important to include children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other developmental disabilities in all aspects of family life. Sometimes, however, finding ways to include them in household chores can be a challenge because these children may have fewer skills and more behavior problems than their typically developing siblings or peers.

**Q: How will I know when my child is ready to learn how to help out around the house?**

**A:** For many tasks, children need basic imitation skills so they can learn to do the task by watching an adult or older sibling. It is also helpful for the child to

be able to follow simple one- and two-step directions given by adults. If your child has acquired any of these skills, he is more likely to have success in completing tasks around the house.

**Q: Is it a good idea to offer him a "reward" for doing chores?**

**A:** Some children may be motivated to help out with chores because they want to participate in family life or feel grown up. However, many children will need additional reinforcement, especially initially. In those cases, reinforcers, or "rewards," may be effective. For example, you might allow your child to watch a favorite television program after his bed is made and his room is clean. Another child might need to be rewarded with special toys or snacks for every step of a household chore or task.

**Q: Can you recommend some techniques for teaching him to help?**

**A:** You will be more likely to succeed in teaching your child how to help out around the house if you use scientifically sound strategies that have been proven to be effective. I recommend using some of the teaching techniques that experienced behavior analysts use when they work with students with special needs. Applied behavior analysis (ABA), for example—a methodology that includes teaching in small steps, using positive rewards, and allowing for lots of practice—has been proven to be a highly effective teaching tool.

Many families naturally apply effective ABA techniques at home. For example, mothers and fathers often teach their child a new skill by 1) giving specific instructions in small steps, 2) prompting their child to complete a step or initiate the next step in a sequence, 3) providing positive reinforcement along the way, such as praise for a step that has been completed, and 4) providing opportunities for a child to repeat steps until he has mastered each one. ABA therapists have named this method—giving specific instructions, prompting, reinforcement, and repetition—"discrete trial instruction," and it is highly effective in teaching many children with ASD and other developmental disabilities to learn skills needed to participate more fully in the activities of their family and community.

There are many fun and stimulating ways to teach these skills that will help children succeed in a wide variety of tasks around the home. For example, to teach matching and sorting skills, you might start by placing several very different items in front of your child and giving him one of those items to match. Sometimes, it's helpful to choose items that typically come in pairs, such as mittens or socks. Initially, you can prompt the child to put identical items together and reward him with effusive praise or another reward that he likes. Gradually, you can offer fewer and fewer prompts until he can match on his own. Discrete trials work best when they are presented

## Chore Charts and Recipe Books Are Helpful Tools

By Anne Stull, M.A., LPA, BCBA, May Institute

One way to teach children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to help with household chores is to create a chore chart and reward the children as they complete their chores. Depending on a child's reading ability, the chore chart may consist of printed words, printed words and corresponding pictures of the child completing the chore, or just pictures of the child completing the chore.

A chore chart with words and pictures has worked well for Caelo, a 9-year-old boy with Asperger's disorder who receives services from May Institute's Southeast Regional Autism Center in Jacksonville, N.C. Caelo's parents, Wayne and Desiree Dufour, are stationed at Cherry Point, N.C. Wayne, a Sergeant in the Marine Corps, is an instructor for the Center for Naval Aviation Technical Training (CNATT).

Caelo started out with a list of chores that included putting his clean clothes away, bringing the groceries inside, bringing the recycling bins into the garage, putting his dishes in the sink, and cleaning his room. When these chores were first introduced, a behavior analyst "modeled," or showed Caelo how to complete the tasks correctly. After he could consistently complete a chore without assistance, that chore was added to his chart to be completed independently.

To help Caelo complete the larger task of cleaning his room, his therapists broke the job down into small steps: 1) making his bed; 2) picking up his toys; and 3) putting his dirty clothes in the laundry basket. Each of these individual steps was added to his checklist.

Caelo's chore chart can be modified depending on what needs to be done around the house at any given time (e.g., the recycling bins only need to be brought back into the garage one time per week). As each chore is completed, it gets checked off so Caelo can see which chores are done and which are not. After he has completed all of the chores on the chart, Caelo has a choice of either playing his Nintendo DS, or playing on the computer for 30 minutes—two of his favorite activities. In addition to this reward system, Caelo also receives verbal praise (e.g., "Great job cleaning your room").

### Making Snacks: A Chore with a Built-in Reward

Another way children with ASD can help around the house is by making their own snacks or small meals, such as popcorn, sandwiches,



and macaroni and cheese.

Creating a "recipe book" that lists the individual steps required to make favorite snacks can help a child learn to prepare food independently. For example, making popcorn can be broken down into six steps: 1) Get popcorn out of the cabinet; 2) Unwrap popcorn bag; 3) Throw wrapper in the trash can; 4) Put popcorn bag in microwave; 5) Push button labeled "popcorn" on the microwave; 6) Open bag – BE CAREFUL, IT'S HOT.

As with the chore chart, the "recipe book" may contain printed words, printed words and corresponding pictures, or just pictures of each step.

The reward for completing this task is, obviously, eating the snack or meal! Again, be sure to provide verbal praise for completion of each step, especially when the child is first learning how to complete the task.

Using this method to teach Caelo has been very effective. His mother Desiree says that Caelo enjoys making sandwiches so much that he will make extra ones and save them in the refrigerator for future snacks.

### Achieving Independence, Appreciating Accomplishments

Chore charts, recipe books, and other learning tools can make a big difference in helping children complete their chores and other household tasks. The time and effort is well worth it, as children build valuable life skills and increase their independence.

Caelo is a perfect example of a young man who relishes his accomplishments and the rewards they bring. It's a little hard," he says, "but it feels good to get my chores done. The reward is my favorite part!"

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clearly, in quick succession, with strong rewards. A board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) can provide you with training in this very effective ABA technique.

### **Q: What kinds of chores will he be able to do?**

**A:** Once your child has mastered basic matching skills, you can teach him to sort silverware, books, and other shelved items, or to put away groceries. It works well to teach these skills using “chaining” procedures which involve teaching the student to do either the final or initial steps of a task then gradually building upon those successes. For example, teach him to sort silverware by starting with a filled silverware tray and ask him to put just one item in the correct spot. After he can put any single item in the correct spot, gradually increase the number of items you ask him to put away. Using this method, you can eventually teach him to put items away even if there are no items present in the tray.

You can also use this method to teach him to shelve books, DVDs, and toys, and to sort laundry and then put it into the washer or dryer. As a reward for accomplishing this task, you might let him start the washing machine and watch the bubbles form.

### **Q: What about children who are unable to learn how to sort or match?**

**A:** Children who do not have matching skills can still participate in household chores. For children who do not yet have basic skills, it is important to start with very low demands and very high rewards. For example, if you would typically clean up all your child’s blocks, ask him to clean up the last block himself, then reward him. Eventually, you may share the task, with you putting away a single item every time your child puts away an item. Children with fewer skills might be able to carry a small trash can and empty it into a larger trash can. They might also be able to put dirty clothes into a laundry basket or put a scoop of food into a pet’s bowl.

### **Q: How many tasks can a child with special needs be expected to complete?**

**A:** It depends on the skill level of the child and his experience with doing chores. It’s better to start with one simple task and then add tasks gradually than to give your child many tasks initially. Once he does a task accurately and without any problem behaviors several times in a row, then it may be reasonable to add an additional task. Always remember to reward your child more as you ask him to do more.

### **Q: How can I help my child develop the skills he needs to clean his own room?**

**A:** Before asking a child to take on a job of this magnitude, it is important to clearly define expectations, and to break the job down into small steps. With a checklist or picture schedule, some children with ASD or other developmental disabilities may be able to complete a complex task, such as cleaning their room, independently. To use a picture schedule and a checklist, you take a series of photographs showing the desired state of the room, and list the steps it will take to get there: 1) make bed, 2) put toys in bin, 3) empty trash, 4) put books on shelf.

### **Q: What should I do if my child refuses to do his chores?**

**A:** First, you should assess whether the task is reasonable. If it is, then the problem may be that the reward is not what the child wants or is simply not powerful enough. You might also pay attention to when you are asking the child to do his chore. If he is doing something he really enjoys, it may be less likely that he will want to stop to complete the chore.

Having a clear schedule that you stick to every day or week will make it more likely that your child will know what to expect. It is important to make sure you follow through and ensure that the child completes the task if it is reasonable. If he refuses, you might restrict privileges such as television or access to electronic items until the child completes the chore.

### **Q: Should I help my child complete his tasks the first few times?**

**A:** The first few times the child completes a new chore, you should help him by modeling what you want him to do and assisting with the tasks, as mentioned earlier. Once your child is able to successfully complete the task, gradually do less and let him do more. Reward him even more for doing the task by himself.

All children can participate in family life at some level. Learning to do simple chores can increase children’s daily living skills and give them skills that will someday be useful in vocational and other activities. Building these skills will also give them a sense of satisfaction and pride as they become contributing members of the family. And, with more help around the house, everyone will have more time to engage in fun family activities and outings! •

### **Serving Military Families Across the Country**

May Institute’s Regional Autism Centers in Georgia, Massachusetts, and North Carolina are dedicated to meeting the immediate and pressing need for services for children with autism spectrum disorders in all branches of the military – Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. The Institute is planning to expand its ability to serve military families through new Centers in Texas, California, and Hawaii, all in close proximity to key military installations.

For more information, call 800-778-7601, or visit [www.mayinstitute.org](http://www.mayinstitute.org).

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