Extra Chores

Regular Chore or Extra Chore?

Most kids have certain chores they do at home, such as washing the dishes or cleaning their room. An “extra” chore is different. It is given as a consequence for a negative behavior. It also has to be something that a child normally doesn’t do, for example, if a preteen talks back rudely to you, and you have him do something extra, such as take out the garbage. Extra chores, just like regular chores, can be large or small, quick and easy or really, really boring.

When to Use Extra Chores

Extra chores are not for children under 7 years. For older children, an extra chore can be just as effective as removing a privilege in most situations. With extra chores, you’re responding to misbehavior by adding something unpleasant; when you remove a privilege, you’re taking away something pleasant. Whichever you choose, it’s important to use it as soon after the misbehavior as possible. That way, he makes a clear connection between his behavior and the consequence. If, for example, you discover that your teen snuck out of the house and you decide to give an extra chore as a consequence, be sure to have him do it as soon as possible. At the very least, he should do it before he can have a next privilege, such as talking on the phone with his friends. In fact, tying an extra chore to a privilege is a doubly good strategy for insuring that the chore really gets done and that the connection between his behavior and the consequence is still fresh in his mind.

The most important thing about an extra chore is simply making that connection to the misbehavior. Try to match the severity of the chore to the seriousness of the misbehavior. If he did something relatively minor, such as not mind you when you asked him to turn off the TV, you might have him walk the dog or write down 10 different reasons minding is important. If he did something more serious, such as taking money from your wallet without asking, you might want to send him a stronger message and give him a tougher extra chore, like scrubbing the bathroom.

Extra chores and taking away privileges are also effective in situations where the problem behavior didn’t just happen. For example, if he has been secretly taking and drinking alcohol from your liquor cabinet, an extra chore can still be an effective consequence, as long as you give it as soon as you discover the misbehavior.
Hidden Behavior

It's not unusual for kids to get into mischief that you don't know about. Sometimes, it's behavior they want to hide from you, and they may tell lies to cover it. If you find out that he took money from you without your permission, rummaged through your private possessions, shoplifted, committed an act of vandalism, hoarded food, or hit a sibling, it's probably not the first time he has done it. Most likely, it has been going on for some time and so it may be difficult to change. Don't change your basic strategy. When you discover the behavior, give him a consequence, whether it's the first or tenth time.

With hidden behavior you can't always be absolutely certain, or be able to prove, that a child did the behavior. If he lies about what he is doing, it can add more doubt. Don't worry about getting rock-solid proof. After some investigation, if you are reasonably sure "in your gut" that he was involved with something, go ahead and follow through with a consequence. Don't overreact, though. Treat the hidden behavior as calmly as you would any other misbehavior. Don't weigh down the problem with lectures about his moral values. Take action instead.

A great way to promote honesty is to reward it. Be careful not to confuse lying with storytelling in younger children. They are not the same thing. Children sometimes tell stories, because they blend or confuse facts and fantasy. If you aren't sure which is which, try asking if the story happened in his mind or in the real world.

With some behavior, once you discover it, you can take some preventive measures. For example, with stealing, you can avoid having to figure out whether or not he is hiding something from you by telling him he is not allowed to bring a new item into the house without a receipt. This puts you in control and eliminates arguments. Instead of listening to stories that the item was found, or a friend gave it to him or he won it in a contest, simply confiscate any new item without a receipt. It may seem unfair at times, but follow through anyway.

Cautions and Tips About Giving Extra Chores

As mentioned above, extra chores are not appropriate for children under 7 years old. Even with children 7-12 years old, make sure the extra chores you give are brief and fairly easy. With teenagers, too, limit even the toughest extra chore to no more than an hour. The important message is giving the consequence, not the severity of the chore.

- Don't pick jobs that require a lot of supervision. It could end up being more of a punishment for you.
- Make sure it's a job you don't care too much about, because he may not put his heart into doing it. That's why pruning your prized roses would not be a good choice. Having him write 50 things he could say instead of swear words is a better consequence. It doesn't matter if his work is sloppy. The idea is not to perfect his penmanship, but to take away his fun and freedom for a brief time.
• Don’t threaten to give an extra chore if he does or doesn’t do something. That is a bribe. An extra chore should be given only as a consequence to a behavior.

• If a child is very defiant, extra chores probably won’t work. You don’t want to use a strategy that adds something else to do if he already resists doing things. Remove a privilege instead. For younger children who are revved up or acting out, a time-out will work better than an extra chore, because it can immediately calm the situation.

• An extra chore should not be too physically demanding. Don’t go overboard, for example, and make your 6-year-old move heavy rocks from one part of the yard to another. Extra chores should do no physical or long-term emotional harm.

• One final note: Even when giving an extra chore, try keeping the home environment upbeat and encouraging. Just as a child won’t mind being put in time-out if the home atmosphere is happy, a child whose everyday life is punishing won’t respond to punishment. Remember that a child will focus on the same things the parents do. Parents who concentrate on positive behavior will teach their child to get attention in a positive way.

Troubleshooting

To make any discipline effective, you must:

Be consistent.

With serious behavior especially, it’s important to respond to every occurrence.

Stay calm.

Discipline works better if the focus is on the misbehavior and not the emotions surrounding it. Act before you get angry.

Stay unemotional.

If you get emotionally involved in the situation, you lose control. Don’t yell or argue.

Keep it small.

Don’t let things escalate and get out of control. Deal with small misbehaviors and small punishments.

Pay attention.

Act on misbehavior as soon as you notice it. Don’t expect it to go away without intervening. It probably won’t.
Common Problems with Discipline

I don’t discipline until I’m really mad.
If you wait until you’re mad, it’s too late – you’re reacting, not thinking.

When I get mad, I just start yelling, and my child doesn’t listen.
Take time to calm down – take a deep breath, slowly count to 10 or even leave for a few minutes – then deliver the consequence in a neutral tone of voice. If you yell, he will hear your anger and not the consequence.

I often give more than one consequence.
If you’re removing a privilege and sending him to his room, you could be waiting too long to act. Intervene early. Try one type of consequence at a time, increasing the severity of the consequences each time.

I find myself reacting and not knowing what I want to do.
Have a plan of action each time he misbehaves.

Sometimes it’s not worth the hassle, and I let some misbehavior slide.
No one can be consistent 100% of the time. Think about the magnitude of the misbehavior and the age of the child. It’s OK to let things slide every now and then. Aim for 80% consistency.

I threaten consequences, but I don’t follow through enough.
Threats don’t accomplish anything; discipline does.

Some Thoughts

It’s easy to feel frustrated by a child’s problem behavior. Think of it this way, though: Each day there are lots of times he decides to do the right thing. Take nothing for granted. Applaud him for his good decisions – it’s so much easier and more pleasant than punishment.

At the same time, have confidence in your own good choices. Discipline is a tough issue, and all parents struggle with the best way to go about it. Any child must learn that there are limits. Your discipline, when done effectively, will teach him to change his behavior, so he can get along better in the world.

If the behavior continues or causes someone injury or harm, you should seek professional help. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
Tips for Different Age Groups

2-6 Years

Don't use extra chores with very young children.

7-12 Years

Use extra chores that are short and not too difficult, physically or emotionally. Be as upbeat as possible. Kids probably won't like doing an extra chore, and they will be sure to tell you how they feel about it. Stay calm, and stick to your plan. Don't dwell on the behavior that earned the extra chore in the first place.

13 Years and Up

Extra chores are a good response to more serious behavior. Most teens will not want to get them. Remain pleasant and positive, and don’t overreact to a behavior that seems particularly troubling because it was hidden from you. Have a backup plan that includes removing a privilege. The two strategies can work effectively hand-in-hand to change behavior.