

# CHORES CHORES CHORES

Catherine Bailey explores how to disrupt the gender imbalance in children's chores.







### Gender bias and inequality can pop up almost anywhere.

Many parents, however, are surprised to learn that their gender bias may influence the amount and type of chores they assign to their kids — even to siblings in the same family.

Across the globe, women do almost three times the amount of housework and child care as men, according to the United Nations. Even mothers who work outside the home report carrying the vast majority of the mental load.

Alarmingly, the imbalance of domestic work starts in childhood. UNICEF found that girls do 40% more chores than boys, leaving boys with an hour more of free time each day.

COVID compounded this imbalance, too.

The pandemic pushed girls to take on more household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, leaving less time for school work. Theirworld's 2021 survey in the UK found that since the pandemic, 66% of girls and women ages 14-24 spent more time cooking for their families, compared with 31% of boys in the same age group.

At first, this inequality between siblings may sound like a boon for boys. More time for leisure, homework, sports, and video games, right?

But parents aren't so sure.

'We may be shortchanging boys with the skill set they bring to a household or living arrangement later in life,' Amelia Pleasant Kennedy says. As a parent and clutter coach at A Pleasant Solution, she believes that an important goal in parenting is to 'raise organised, self-sufficient humans to go out into the world.'

After all, if boys don't learn these skills as children and teenagers, will women continue to shoulder domestic responsibilities in subsequent generations, perpetuating care inequality?

As many millennial parents rethink traditional structures of discipline, communication, and hierarchy at home under philosophies such as gentle parenting or positive discipline, so too have they begun to re-envision chores, allowances, and sticker charts. Many parents have even dropped the word 'chores' from their language altogether. Instead, they prefer to classify them as contributions to the household.

'There's no chore list in our home,' parent and children's book author Zen Neer says. 'Instead of saying "chores," I say, "we have household responsibilities. Which would you like to do today?"' Neer wants all three of their kids to value the family structure, take responsibility for spaces they use frequently, and focus on helping each other.

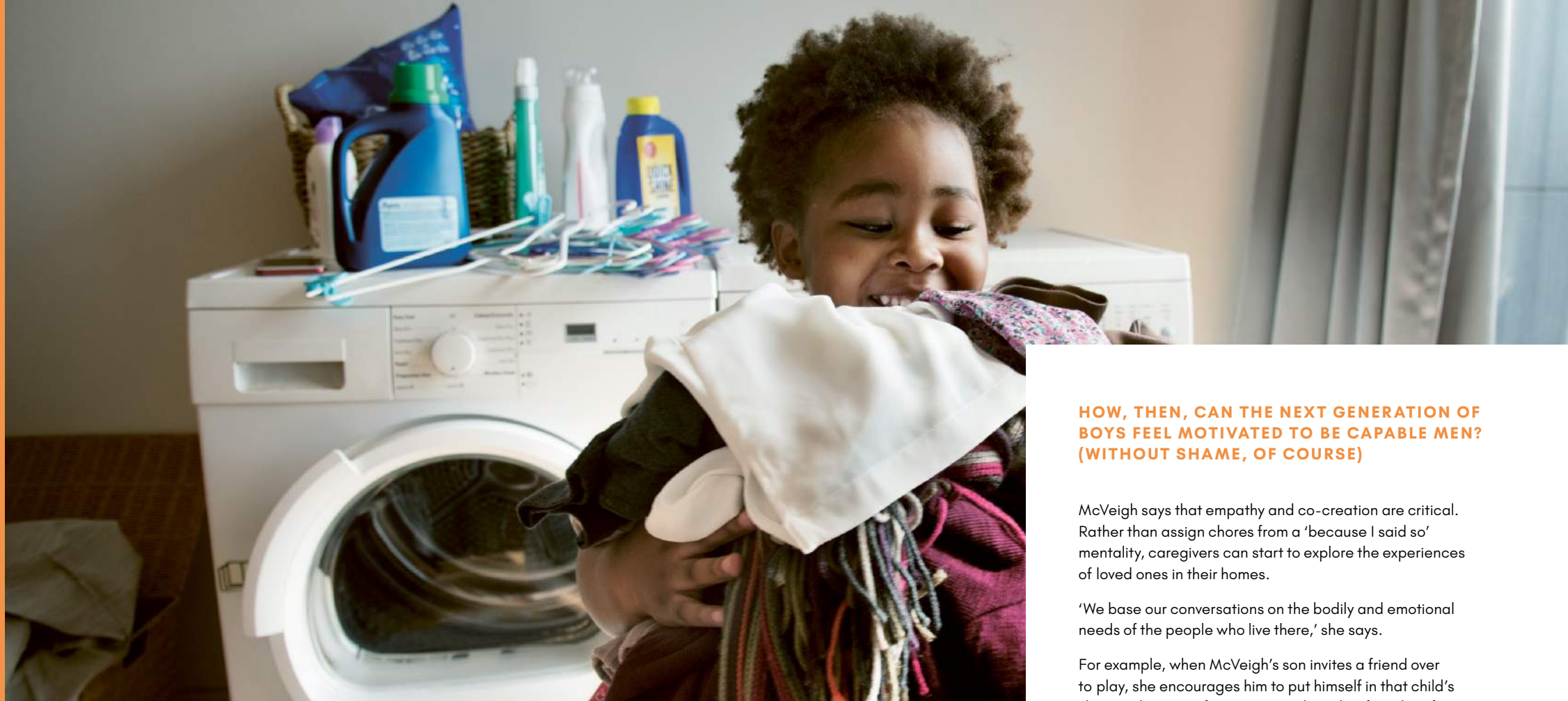
Subtle shifts like this may diminish inequality among siblings — and among boys and girls — for the types of housework they complete.

In 2021, a longitudinal study in Ireland found that children still tend to engage in very 'gender typical' chores, such as girls cooking and doing laundry, while parents assign boys to do outdoor maintenance and empty the bins. These gender-stereotyped tasks originate largely from caregivers. Not surprisingly, many mothers engage daughters more in cooking and shopping, while fathers engage their sons more frequently in home improvement projects.

How, then, can parents use an intentional approach to chores and housework to avoid the gendered division of labour for future generations?



“Noticing what needs to be done is equally as important as executing the task.”



#### ROLE MODELLING IS ONE WAY

‘In our partnership, I do more of the fixing and maintenance; more of the “solving” with tools,’ Kennedy says.

Neer echoes this. ‘Our kids see their dad do most of the cooking, while I tend to be the one assembling furniture and toys.’

Kennedy and Neer both acknowledge, however, that sometimes this can be difficult in practice. Cultural factors, such as race, religion, and upbringing often impede gender equity goals. With African American roots, Kennedy sees this firsthand. ‘Many households are working against a more patriarchal, dominant cultural standard,’ she says.

Neer notes that, in several religions, ‘women are still very much expected to play a female stereotypical gender role.’ But they remain hopeful. ‘Times are changing. Little by little, we’re moving away from that.’

#### NOTICING THE MESS IS ANOTHER WAY TO UPEND TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AT HOME

Marie McVeigh, a parent and content creator living in Canada, teaches her son to notice what needs to be done.

By de-centering herself as the default household manager, a role so often attributed to the oldest woman in the home, she hopes to raise a more independent, empowered adult.

‘How can you contribute to the household today?’ McVeigh asks her son regularly. This removes the power struggle often linked to children’s ‘chores’ and enables him to participate in the household more fully.

Kennedy agrees. ‘Noticing what needs to be done is equally as important as executing the task.’ Attention to those details will lighten the load, she hopes, both in the workplace and at home.

#### HOW, THEN, CAN THE NEXT GENERATION OF BOYS FEEL MOTIVATED TO BE CAPABLE MEN? (WITHOUT SHAME, OF COURSE)

McVeigh says that empathy and co-creation are critical. Rather than assign chores from a ‘because I said so’ mentality, caregivers can start to explore the experiences of loved ones in their homes.

‘We base our conversations on the bodily and emotional needs of the people who live there,’ she says.

For example, when McVeigh’s son invites a friend over to play, she encourages him to put himself in that child’s shoes. What sort of environment does that friend prefer? How can we make this a pleasing experience to that particular child?

One can almost imagine her son as a grown adult, re-filling a guest’s drink at his dinner party, not because it was written on a to-do list, but because he anticipated the needs of his loved ones. All because of empathy and a desire to care for his family and friends.

So, will it work? Can we diminish our bias among siblings, treat boys and girls more equally, and disrupt the gendered imbalance of domestic work?

McVeigh says her son is the only one in the home who replaces the toilet paper roll on the holder. ‘He does it because he’s conscious of it. That’s a win for me, right?’

It sure is. And best of all, it sounds like a win for equality!

#### REMOVING SHAME AND MORALITY ASSOCIATED WITH HOUSEWORK IS A CRITICAL STRATEGY TO DISRUPT THE GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

‘Years ago, housework became linked to this idea of feminine virtue,’ McVeigh says. Still today, we largely socialise girls to be sensitive to shame and focused on perfectionism. This perfect storm of virtue plus perfectionism leads to women shouldering more domestic responsibilities.

‘Girls are raised to be sensitive to when others disapprove of them,’ McVeigh says. ‘So when we use the model of virtue for domestic labour, girls look for ways to feel less ashamed about themselves. So they experiment. Girls notice if they do household labour well, people will shame them less.’

From here, McVeigh observes that girls begin to build their own mental model for the home without even being instructed. Meanwhile, boys aren’t socialised through this same lens to feel shame for an unclean, untidy home.

*Catherine Bailey is a gender equity expert, certified Fair Play facilitator, and founder of Think or Blue, which uses feminist parenting strategies to disrupt gender stereotypes.*