

DO I HAFTA?

Few things cause more irritation to a parent of a preadolescent than trying to get him or her to work. Excuses, procrastination, false starts, and flat-out refusal are the order of the day when it comes to asking a preadolescent to perform even the smallest task. This is especially puzzling and agitating since the same child was so energetic and helpful until just a few months ago!

“What’s going on here ?” “What can we do about it ?”

We can begin by understanding the emotional highs and low of this age. Preadolescents are alternately filled with energy and lifelessness. This is due to many factors, including hormone changes and growth cycles. Preadolescents often start projects with vigor, but abandon them when they are only half finished. Others simply take on more than they can accomplish, then feel frustrated when they can’t get everything done. Finally, some are oppressed by a lack of energy. Understanding these ups and downs should encourage parents to capitalize on periods of energy and avoid nagging during times of listlessness.

Break down big chores into smaller parts. Sometimes young people feel overwhelmed by tasks, especially those they’ve let go for a long time. A disastrous bedroom, twenty-three overdue math assignments, a long-term project that’s “suddenly” due in a few days (or hours) - all of these cause the preadolescent to choose to give up rather than get started.

Help your child by setting up smaller goals: clean off your bed; get five assignments done tonight; assemble the materials for the project. Preadolescents have trouble structuring tasks so that they are more approachable. In even an off-hand way, we can help them in this.

Of course, the hardest part in any task is getting started. We have all had the experience of avoiding tasks by doing everything else but the task itself. Kids do the same thing. Small chores that they usually ignore become urgent when there’s a bigger one waiting. Once begun, though, tasks can be completed; we just need to get ourselves - or our preadolescent - into getting started. A homework assignment is more easily begun if one starts by reviewing yesterday’s work. A messy bedroom could be approached by

starting with the top of the dresser. Clearing just the silverware off the table might begin the dish washing process.

Students this age live in the "now". That is why, if you say, "Take out the trash." and the preadolescent says, "Later". you are doomed. Later is a different now, and is as incomprehensible to a young person as trying to figure out the time in Manila if it's 8 p.m. here. Time has almost no steady meaning to a preadolescent. A simple task will take "A-L-L-L night!", an assignment due in two weeks might as well be due in the year 2002; the most recently earned mark is the one they expect on a report card, regardless of how well or poorly they have performed otherwise. Discussions about the past or the future are meaningless if a perception of time is part of the discussion. Accept this, and capitalise on the "now" as much as you can.

Parents have the right to ask that preadolescents perform ordinary chores when they are asked to do so.

"Yes, you 'hafta"

Don't degenerate into sarcasm or name-calling. This causes anger, resentment, and rebelliousness, and damages the relationship. In the long run, no task is that important.