LIFE 101

What every child should learn before you let them fly the coop

You walk into your bathroom, and the toilet paper roller is empty. On the back of the toilet sits a new roll, put there by a previous visitor who apparently never mastered the task of replacing a roll of toilet paper.

Reloading the dispenser is just one of those things that kids should learn before they move out, things that will stay with them throughout adulthood. They don't pick up these life lessons by themselves; that's what parents are for.

But when should the mystery of the toilet paper roll have been explained? When the child was 3? 10? Certainly by voting age.

Here then are some of the tasks kids need to learn, and when their parents should be teaching them.

How to read the gameboard

The icons represent the life tasks that children need to learn. The colors of the individual squares correspond to age children can begin performing the tasks as noted by the spinner.

LIFE TASKS

HOUSEHOLD

Laundry: Start sorting clothes at 2 and help load and unload a washer or dryer at 3. Wait until they're 10 before they handle detergent or fabric softener, even a little older when bleach is involved.

Do the dishes: You can hand a 3-year-old a wet pot — dentable but not breakable — and a dish towel. A 4-year-old can load and unload a dishwasher, but keep them away from glassware and sharp objects. A 9-year-old should be able to handle it all.

Iron a shirt: Michelle Duggar, the mom on TLC's "18 Kids and Counting," has 10-year-old twins who iron. "They're capable of pulling the ironing board out, plugging in the iron and getting a few wrinkles out," she says. "Maybe it's not a perfect job, but they can do it."

Set a table: A 5-year-old can put out plates, silverware and napkins. As the child gets older, he or she can ratchet up the layout. By 12, with a little supervision, the kid could be setting out the good china, crystal, silver and linen napkins.

Trash: A 3-year-old can sort recyclables; at 7 or 8 a child can take out the trash.

Clean a toilet: Start them early, at 3 or 4, with a cloth moistened with alcohol to wipe the outside of the bowl and the floor around it. Hand them a toilet brush at 6, and by 9 or 10 let them graduate to a cleaner they spray on and let sit before scrubbing off.

Sew a button: There should be some familiarity with a needle and thread by 7 or 8. The Duggar boys learned to stitch a seam on a sewing machine by 8. "It's a machine," their mom explains.

Make a bed: A 2- or 3-year-old can make his or her bed. Maybe not perfectly, but good enough. The more they practice, the better they'll get. Kids should be proficient by 8.

Dial 911: By 5 a child should know how to call 911 and what to tell the emergency operator.

Change a light bulb: You spend years teaching them not to play with sockets and electricity, so wait until they're 6 before dealing with bulbs.

SKILLS FOR LIFE

Tie their shoes: Age 4.

Shut off the water: Not at the tap, but at the main valve or at the toilet tank. Kevin O'Connor, host of PBS' "This Old House," figures 10 is a good age. "My main shut-off is so old and rusty; I'd be afraid of them breaking it if they got their hands on it any sooner."

Throw a circuit breaker: Also 10. "Might as well get them up to speed on all the systems ... the same year," O'Connor says.

Balance a checkbook/pay bills: They're too young to have their own, but middle-schoolers should know how to balance a checkbook, says Mary Suiter, manager of economic education at the Federal Reserve Bank in St. Louis. The same with paying bills. She points out another bonus of getting the kids involved: It reinforces math skills.

Use a house key: Age 6, says O'Connor. "The sooner the better. Saves them from sneaking back in through windows." Younger kids also can be taught to lock the door when the family is in the house and how to unlock a bathroom door in case they get locked in.

Tell time: By 6.

Pump your own gas: States set age minimums, but even a 10-year-old can watch and learn.

Use a screwdriver: Age 3. "I never taught my youngest this, but that's when he picked it up," O'Connor says. "New batteries for Christmas toys seems to be the great educator."

Make a Screwdriver: 21, when they're legal.

Bait a hook/fish: 7 to 8 years old.

Use power tools: O'Connor: "Four, when it comes to screw guns and such. Not sure when I'll let him run the circular saw; probably at 8 in front of me, 12 in front of his mother."

Change a tire: By 15 years and 364 days; before they get the license.

FOOD AND DRINK

In the kitchen: No reason a 2- or 3-year-old can't help out, learning the basics of measuring and stirring, maybe even making their first peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich. A 4-year-old can learn to prepare a simple salad (scissor open the bag of prepared salad and pour on some dressing); at 10, a child can chop, slice and dice with supervision (even younger if you have a push-top dicer); by 11 kids should be able to make a grilled cheese sandwich or scramble an egg.

Open a can: Have them master it by 7, says Ginny Bean, creator of the home furnishing and gift website ginnys.com. "Especially when they're doing feed-the-pet chores," she says, adding another chore to the list.

Use a corkscrew: Not till they're 18, Bean says, "if they have a job waiting tables at a fancy restaurant. And no other reason."

ETIQUETTE

Telephone skills: By the time they're 6, youngsters can begin to learn phone etiquette.

At the table: By 4, they should know to chew with their mouth closed, use a napkin and excuse themselves.

Navigate a multicourse dinner party: "Ask Amy" columnist Amy Dickinson says "kids as young as 3 can be taught to sit without wiggling too much through a basic meal, to put their napkins on their laps, say 'please' and 'thank you' and ask to be excused." By the time a child is 8 or 9, she says, "they are completely capable of handling a longer dinner, and I think it's a great idea to include children in adult dinners."

Meeting new people: When they're 4 or 5, kids should be taught to stand and approach people — not just adults, but kids too — to greet them, making eye contact and shaking their hand.

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