

Housework with Husband and Children (1955)

Abstract

This 1955 letter to the editor of the East German women's magazine *Die Frau von heute* [*The Woman of Today*] described the division of labor in a household with two working parents. The female author was proud of the fact that, as a working woman, she was able to manage the household largely with the help of her three children. She also saw pedagogical value in her children's contribution. It would appear, however, that her husband worked only sporadically in the household, so this was far from an equal division of household labor.

Source

Today I want to report on how we divide up the work in our household to get everything done. Where would I be if, in addition to working full time, I had to do all the housework myself?

I get up at 5:30 a.m., get ready, and see my husband off. Then I prepare breakfast for the children and myself and wake them. In the meantime, I already start airing out the bedroom, and while the children are getting washed up, I open the windows in their room and the living room. After breakfast we divide up the subsequent work as follows: Gisela and Angela – now fifteen and twelve – make their beds in the children's room, sweep, and mop. The dusting in the children's room is then done by the nine year-old boy. Since he sleeps on the couch in the living room, he first brings his bedding into the children's room – by now he does this without being told. Then the living room is put in order. Jürgen arranges the couch blanket nice and straight on the couch and puts his things away, I sweep the rug, and the girls push the mop all around and dust. Before I leave the house at around 8 o'clock I take another look at all three of them to make sure they look proper. A little later the children leave the house. Because the four of us divide the work, everyone has only a little bit to do; no one overworks himself or is stressed out, and we have a tidy apartment. After dinner we do the dishes again together and Jürgen scrambles to dry them; he is very proud when either I or the girls tell him that, once again, he did it very fast and well. One must never forget to praise.

I believe that children cannot learn early enough to be independent and to get used to certain small chores . . . My girls learned from age ten to darn their own socks; so today I no longer have to do any of that, I only have to check now and then to be sure they are doing it properly. My nine year-old should cultivate these minor handiwork skills just like the girls. He already sews his buttons (which are loose all the time) back on himself, because he knows how annoying it is when they go missing. My fifteen year-old, Gisela, has been keeping all her things in order for half a year; that is, she also washes her own underwear. My twelve year-old, Angela, washes her own socks, while I do all the laundry that requires boiling. With Jürgen, I still have to see when he will be able to wash his own socks well enough. He already wants to help right now, because he wants to be considered as big and independent as the two girls, who take these small chores very seriously. (That they don't always feel like doing them, and how I deal with that, I will relate on a different occasion.)

Since we are talking about the laundry and are pondering how a working mother can accomplish her household duties, I still want to mention that I take the bedding and other large items to the laundry. That has to be an option when I am working the entire day. Heavy underwear and towels – with five people that really adds up – I wash myself. But my husband helps with the dishes, and also hangs the laundry to dry when his work allows, so that I don't have such a difficult time.

Source: *Die Frau von heute* 27 (1955), p. 17; reprinted in Ina Merkel, ed., ... *und Du, Frau an der Werkbank. Die DDR in den fünfziger Jahren*. Berlin: Elefant Press, 1990, p. 149.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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