

Dealing With Lots of Messy Young Houseguests? Consider a Chore Doc

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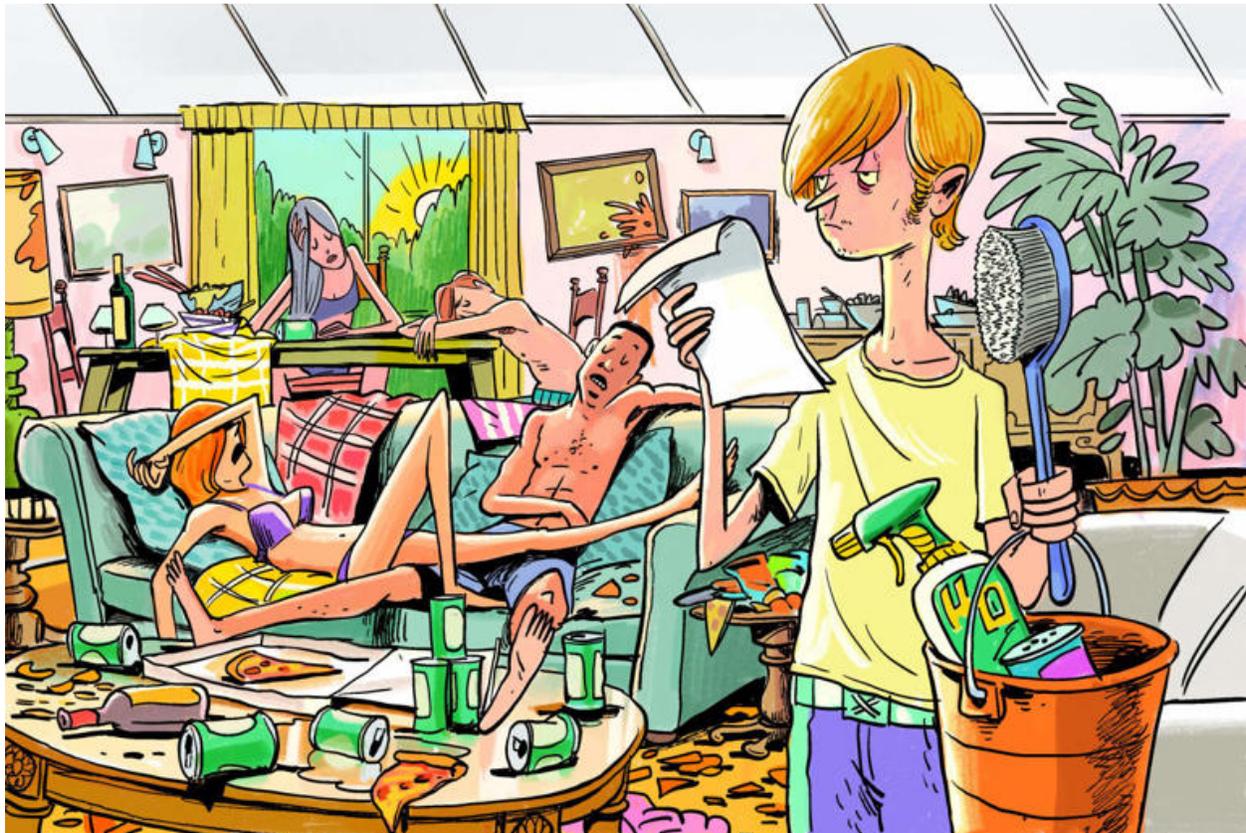


Illustration: Zohar Lazar

Ahh, the sounds of summer: a cannonball ka-plunk in the pool, a whoosh down a slip and slide on the lawn. But when your kids and their guests move inside this season, it's not a pretty sight. There's more chaos in our homes now than at any other time of the year. They'll scatter explosions of Doritos bigger than any splash in the water.

Young visitors aren't always helpful. Ever hear a hollow "Lemme know what I can dooooooo?" from a teen or 20-something? The last part trails off as they run to the pool, leaving behind wet towels limper than their offer to pitch in.

If you have kids who can plot a calculus curve but forget how to clear a table, I have a solution: a Google Chore Doc. It's a list of all the tasks in my life that I either can't or don't want to do.

The list is long—it stands now at 47—and if you are under 30, staying in my home, eating my food and guzzling my booze, I expect you to accomplish at least one item during your stay. Everyone should plan to put in around an hour of work.

I share a digital copy when guests arrive, and they can pick what they want. Just friggin' complete it, is all I ask. If they misplace their phone, there are copies on the kitchen island piled up like real estate brochures.

Perhaps you think your own children don't need a list—they clean up after themselves in the homes of others, right? Guess what? Mine don't and neither do yours. I've got great kids, but they always seem to need a bathroom whenever it's time to do the dishes. The Chore Doc offers some structure for young people who are too amped up and distracted to remember their manners.

My document includes big-ticket group jobs like #15: Gather a team to wash the green mold off the patio furniture. And quickie solo tech tasks, such as #8: Stop my f*%king iPhone from constantly alerting me that my [Apple](#) devices “are no longer detected” nearby. *I'm fully aware that I did not take my laptop with me to yoga class.*

Try it: Compile a list of all those irritating things in your home that you will never do. My luggage has weathered, out-of-date address tags. I'm always scrambling to use a paper tag at the airport that I worry will fall off. Ergo #10: Find every travel bag in my home and replace the tags with neat, typed-up cards with my email and phone.

My three children, who are between the ages of 23 and 28, have their very own personalized 24/7, your-phone-is-still-on-my-Verizon-account Chore Doc. It's more family-related, with jobs like changing my retail and travel passwords or ensuring that all 25 extended family members are equally represented on our photo wall. I also add all the items my kids hastily deleted from the list for their friends. *(Mom, you cannot ask my friends to see what colors Saks has in your favorite Manolo Blahnik slingbacks.)*

My older daughter recently complained that her new law-school friends can't figure out if I'm treating them like I'm their mother or their boss. *It's both, honey.*

Plenty of studies show that giving children responsibilities helps them feel more capable and confident. They know they are being trusted with a job, and they often feel some satisfaction when they complete it, despite their grumbling. Giving young people chores can also hone their executive-function skills, as these tasks require time-management, delayed gratification and an ability to recall instructions.

I don't give a hoot if my kids and their friends find me annoying. It's important that 22-year-olds understand that cleaning the back patio from last night's “rager” doesn't mean gathering three

beer cans and leaving 19. If they are hung over, you'll have to remind them to finish the job. That's what playing nice as an adult means.



Houseguests help reorganize Holly Peterson's home library.

I'll venture to say that the 12 kids who came for my younger daughter's 22nd birthday weekend had fun blasting music and completing a big one-and-done group chore. A few years ago, a "helpful" adult had gone commando and reorganized all my books by color, which made my home look like a Jonathan Adler boutique. I'd hated it for too long.

My young houseguests dumped all the books into piles and reordered them on the shelves by fiction, nonfiction, feminism, languages and so on—the way they had been. In one hour, these kids completed a task that would have taken me at least 12. I was beyond grateful.

My friend Clara Bingham has a husky voice that she didn't have 10 years ago. Why? She screamed so much at her three kids one summer that she burst a polyp in her throat. When I first suggested the Chore Doc a few years ago, she told me she lacked the cojones. This summer, she's come around.

"It's all about not having to ask what I need done, which they don't seem to get," Bingham said. "Just look around, guy, clear the table, hang up the beach towels and take out the garbage."

Try not to load your Chore Doc with the kind of IT-department fixes that kids can complete with a click and an eye roll. Instead, devise tech-adjacent tasks that require some ingenuity, like #23: "Take my disco list on [Spotify](#) and add 30% non-mom-dorky songs. NO HOUSE MUSIC, but still excellent dance songs like that Dua Lipa lady."

You can tailor chores to any age. Hugo, 7, didn't quite love his Memorial Day job of scrubbing dirty sand off my hurricane lamps but conceded that the trade seemed fair. "You have good food," he said. "And I like your tree swing." Although it's vaguely unethical and probably illegal, I now put my 13-year-old niece Frankie to work as a bartender. She makes a mean Manhattan.

For tasks that take longer, I'll start paying kids after one hour, usually their age in dollars. But it's best to keep paid tasks and general household chores separate, to ensure kids don't start to see things like stripping beds as a tit-for-tat business transaction.



One of the many door stoppers filled by a houseguest.

I've screwed up, of course. Apparently asking Oscar, my older daughter's new boyfriend, to fill a bunch of door snakes—that is, cloth door draft stoppers—was a bit much. He came to her with a worried look and asked, “What is a door snake? Why is it at the door?”

Then again, Oscar filled the door snakes so well—with the 50-pound bag of rice and funnel I supplied—that I let him come back without my daughter but with four of his 6-foot-6-inch varsity crew teammates. They got all-you-can-eat pigs in a blanket and sliders for a full weekend, and I got plenty of furniture moved around.

Holly Peterson writes the Earn Your Luck column for WSJ. Magazine and contributes essays to The Wall Street Journal.