

The Christian Family and Social Movement
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To Have or Not to Have.....a maid

When we returned to Singapore after a 2¼ years stint in Australia, my husband and I debated for a while as to whether we should employ a maid. I had more or less made up my mind long before the question was posed to me.

If we could survive in Australia with no domestic help, no extended family network to rely on, 4 children of whom one was just 4 months old when we moved there, a double storey house with 9 rooms and 3 toilets to maintain, and an expansive garden to upkeep, do I still need a maid in Singapore? We decided that if we can just live our lives here the same way as we did in Australia, we should be able to remain independent of the services of a live-in domestic helper who is seen as indispensable in the lives of today's Singaporean families.

Our family had one domestic helper. It was years ago. She was a quiet, simple, and hardworking Indonesian who left her child and husband to come here to work for us. At that time, my third child was just about 18 months old, I was about to take on a more demanding job and we had just moved into a house which required more work than our previous 3 room HDB unit.

After 2 years, our maid expressed her desire to return to her own family. We did not employ another one as we discovered, to our horror, how dependent my 2 sons were on her. She mollycoddled them even though they were capable of doing things on their own. It took us 2 years to "wean" our family of having a full time maid, and train the children to be independent again. Looking back, it was a wise decision as it prepared us for our relocation to Australia some years later.

How did we survive in Australia with no external help? A Singaporean friend who had earlier migrated to Australia advised us to get our children to participate in the housework. She should know because she had trained her 3 sons so well that they are able to do all household chores, including cooking for a party. She did not have to worry about them when they moved to other parts of Australia for work. "Each of her sons is worth 5 Singaporean women put together", another migrant friend said in jest.



It was not difficult getting our children to help with the household chores when we were in a new place and where every household is “as DIY as another”. Our children seemed to take it into their strides and accepted doing household chores as part and parcel of living there.

Even though we had a dishwasher, they took turns to do the dishes every night except on Sundays. They helped to hang out the laundry on the clotheslines, bring them in when they were dry, fold them and put them away in the respective cupboards. They were responsible for keeping their own rooms neat and tidy. They learnt to sweep/vacuum/mop the floor. They looked after their baby brother when I was busy with cooking. The boys had to push the heavy trash bins out every week, a chore that could be a little smelly during summertime, and, they hardly complained. They helped to clear the grass after my husband mowed the lawn.

I even taught them to cook rice and porridge in case of emergencies, eg. if I was sick. I had to congratulate myself for this foresight. Once, when my husband was away on an overseas trip, I came down with stomach flu. We didn't want to get our friends to come and help as stomach flu was contagious and we could pass the bug to another family. My eldest son, who was not affected by the flu, cooked porridge for the whole family.

We decided that the benefits of being “maidless” and sharing household chores with the children far outweigh the cons. The children have become more confident and independent. They learn to manage their time better. If they have too much homework on the day they are supposed to wash the dishes, they negotiate and swap dates with one another. They beamed with pride when they performed their chores exceptionally well and received a pat on the back. They still require the usual reminders now and then, but to this day they will not procrastinate even though they know that most of their peers (in Singapore) do not need to help out at home as they have maids to help them.

My teenage son came back from his Sec 2 camp a couple of months ago and told me he was shocked to find out during the camp that some of his classmates do not know how to wash their own plates after meals.

Initially, back home in Singapore, I was worried that they may be too bogged down with the long school day of remedial/supplementary classes, curricular activities and private lessons to help out at home. In Australia, they got much less homework and were given more time to complete.

However, after calculating the time they spent watching television and playing computer games, we concluded that the time spent on helping out with housework is just a fraction of it. In our view, getting them involved in housework builds their characters and teaches them basic life skills. It is not detrimental to their grades, contrary to what many Singaporean parents think.

A friend asked me for the secrets of getting our children to help with the chores. I advised her to fire her maid first. That friend's daughters came over to our house to play with my daughter. They willingly cleaned up after playing and washed the dishes for me after having their afternoon tea. They would not do it at home because they said they have their domestic helper to do it for them.

My husband is not exempted from helping out at home too. When the children see that both parents perform their share of household chores, they will understand that each member of the family (including Dad) has a part to play in the upkeep of our home. If the head of the family cannot humble himself to help with the housework (which some men still view as the women's territory), it will be an uphill task to engage his sons to help their mother at home.

Through everyone's example, even our toddler son learnt to spontaneously reach for a broom to sweep up the biscuit crumbs he had dropped on the floor or put his dirty clothes in the laundry basket without much prompting. His favourite words "Can I help you?" are like honey to my ears. I am not sure if this offer to help will continue to be so spontaneous and generous when he is officially put on the roster the day he is of age.

We realised that we have to lower our expectations whenever the children help out. We do not expect them to be meticulous in carrying out their chores. We close one eye when they miss the dust at the corners. The casualty rate for the crockery can be alarmingly high initially but with time and practice, they learn how to handle their chores more efficiently.

We should also not be perfectionists and expect our homes to be spick and span all the time. I used to panic whenever friends want to come over to our house. At the back of my mind, I would be listing the cleaning tasks that I have yet to catch up with before they come. I wanted to give a good impression of our family, based on how our home looked like. As a result, I felt that I was becoming more and more reluctant to open my home to friends. I used to believe that those families with maids would be more willing to open their homes for meetings or gatherings because their homes would always be in tip-top condition to receive guests. How erroneous this is! It is not the state of a person's home that matters but the generosity and hospitality of her heart.

When I shared with my friends in Australia about what life is like having a maid in the home, some expressed disbelief. And one of them cheekily remarked this to me "No wonder the Singaporean housewives have the energy to chase their children on school work all the time!" Maybe there is some truth in this remark.

Now that we are in Singapore, we are also blessed with our extended family's support when we need them. We get to enjoy our privacy. We are spared from worries that some families face when having a maid. And I no longer look at my neighbour's bigger house with envy.

Though at times our flesh are tired and overworked, our souls are enriched manifold.

It is my family's choice that while I remain the full time mother/housewife, all of them will participate in homemaking.

article by....Joanna

Christian Reflections

How do families in other countries especially developed countries, live without domestic help?

List the skills and qualities children can learn from participating in house work.

What are our priorities? To raise children with good academic records who are not capable of taking care of themselves outside the home OR independent children with well rounded characters and attitudes?

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