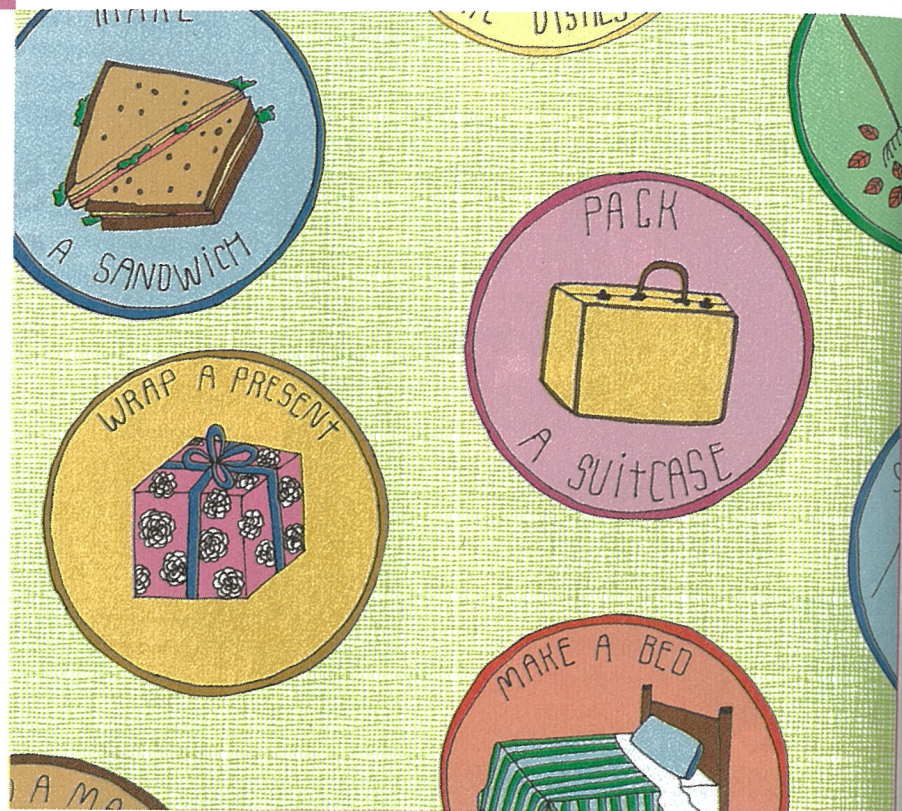


Scouting for ways to make her kids more self-sufficient, a mom dreams up a fun badge system for household tasks *By Sandra A. Miller*

## The Power of Project Do-It

**One Saturday afternoon,** I was trying to meet a work deadline when my daughter, Addie, age 8, barged into my home office asking me to make her a sandwich. "In a minute," I answered distractedly. But as I headed toward the kitchen, I had a modern-day Confucius moment. "Give a child a sandwich," I thought, "and she'll eat for a day. Teach her to make a sandwich, and she'll eat for a lifetime."

That's when Project Do-It was born. I thought about all the tasks that Addie and her 11-year-old brother, Phinny, were perfectly capable of accomplishing on their own but still expected me or my husband, Mark, to do for them. These ranged from simple household chores to more complex jobs, such as wrapping a present or packing a suitcase for a weekend away. What would it take, I wondered, to change their perceptions and prompt them



to be more self-sufficient? And then I came up with the key element of Project Do-It: a series of badges, modeled after those used in scouting, to track and reward skill-building. Could this idea really work?

I pitched the concept at the dinner table that night, and the kids liked it immediately. After a bit of family brainstorming, we settled on ten age-appropriate, badge-worthy tasks, including pumping up bicycle tires, reading a road map, putting clean sheets on a bed, and, yes, making a sandwich from start to finish (including returning the mayo to the fridge and wiping off the counter).

The reward for both of them successfully mastering all ten skills, we decided, would be a backpacking trip. Our family often went car camping, but venturing into the

backcountry would require Mark and me to expand our own skill sets so that our family could try roughing it in a way we hadn't done before.

**To launch the project,** the kids and I created two sets of ten badges, drawing the designs on mailing labels cut to shape and stuck onto large buttons. I cut two lengths of cloth for sashes so that the kids could sew on the badges as they earned them (and earn a button-sewing badge in the process!).

True to their personalities, Addie wanted to start acquiring badges right away, while Phinny was happy to take a more organic approach. In other words, Addie spent an afternoon perfecting her present-wrapping skills with newspapers and shoe boxes, but Phinny waited until an actual birthday gift needed his attention.

ADVANCE NOTICE

That was fine with Mark and me. The point was to teach some basic skills, not to nag about them or foster competition between our kids. We didn't get hung up on who earned what badge when, just as long as everyone stayed committed to moving the endeavor forward.

**Not only did the project** take effort on the part of the children, but it also meant that sometimes Mark or I had to stop what we were doing for a teachable moment.

For example, when I got lost on back roads going to a soccer game, Phinny decided he should read the map, get us to the field, and earn his map-reading badge. Fighting the urge to figure it out myself, I took a breath, unfolded the map, and showed my son how to navigate. He came home that day with a real sense of accomplishment. Of course, having watched her brother earn his map badge, Addie immediately wanted to go for a drive and get lost, too!

Some skills were easy and fun to teach. When a weekend getaway provided the kids with a chance to earn their suitcase-packing badge, we made a checklist for them to follow. Afterward, we taped a copy of the list inside each of their closets for future reference. Amazingly, forgotten toothbrushes and swim goggles have become things of vacations past.

Pumping up bicycle tires was similarly simple. Before we set off on a ride one Sunday afternoon, we supervised Phinny and Addie as they inflated their own bike tires. They even learned how to change the

pump's valve so that they could work on the adult bicycles as well. Now either one of them can prepare all our bikes for a family ride.

Certainly, there were times when both teaching and acquiring skills felt more like a chore. Both kids now know how to load the dishwasher, but Mark and I still help out when they need extra motivation to get it done. Putting clean sheets on a bed was another task the kids dreaded, but once Addie discovered that she relished the challenge of folding neat hospital corners, she earned her badge like a star boot-camp recruit.

**The badges were meant** to give our children a sense of self-sufficiency — and they have. But they've done more than that, because many of the skills Phinny and Addie have gained now help the whole household run more smoothly. For example, since the two have mastered "Learn how to take a phone message," if the doctor's office calls to cancel an appointment, they leave a note on the kitchen counter with the date, the time, and the message. Incredible!

Mark and I don't have outrageous expectations about how independent our children should be, but since the four-month period of Project Do-It ended last year, we've enjoyed watching them tackle jobs that once seemed daunting to them. And though I still love making sandwiches for Phinny and Addie, on those stressful days when I can't get away from my desk, it's pretty wonderful when one of them offers to make a sandwich for me.

*Sandra A. Miller lives with her very capable family in Arlington, Massachusetts.*



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