

Child Labor Comes in Handy

By Eric Miller



Kids drive parents crazy if given the upper hand. I try to control the deck as best as possible. Youth is no match against experience.

Like many parents, I nag my kids to do their homework and clean their rooms. My folks did that and I turned out okay. My wife and I parent two daughters. We enjoy watching these future taxpayers gain their independence.

Thankfully, child labor laws do not apply to parents; Or at least I plead ignorance on the matter. I put them to work. My dad taught me that. Free labor is a rite of passage for kids and a gold mine for parents. The challenge is getting kids to do what you want. I'm sure Dad tired of seeing my eyes roll when asking me to do chores. So, he took advantage of parental ingenuity.

I was a high school junior when I asked Dad how he developed such muscular forearms. Weight lifting did not seem to help. Dad had waited years for my question. He blurted his answer, seizing the opportunity like a lion on beef steak. "They came from mowing the lawn," Dad said.

I swallowed the bait. We lived on 12 acres, two of which needed mowing. Convinced I'd have "Popeye" forearms by the start of my senior year, I mowed the equivalent of 40 football fields that summer. By the time school started, I had a spectacular tan. My forearms were wings.

"Maybe you should try digging fence-post holes," Dad said, "Or move that pile of bricks." Dad had it all planned.

I learned from Dad and began experimenting with my own kids, starting with Maggie, my 7th grader.

Maggie is analytical and cunning. She knows the desired answer before asking a question and has the ability to quietly vanish if chores are involved. Maggie is also mechanically inclined, thanks to her mom's dominant genes. So, I commissioned her to tune-up the lawnmower.

"Maggie, I need your help."

"I'm busy Dad."

"Homework?"

"Nope, busy," she answered, while lounging on the couch playing computer games.

I unplugged the computer. "Not anymore, come on."

She trudged outside, head hung low as if walking to the gallows.

"You've always wanted a horse," I told her. "Better learn about horsepower first."

She took the bait. We have three lawnmowers, two we push and one we ride. I laid tools on a tarp and explained their use. Maggie yawned. "Use the socket wrench to loosen the spark-plug. Then unscrew it with your hand. We'll clean it."

"Dad, what if I get electrocuted?"

"You won't. Besides, your mom will kill me if you're electrocuted."

Maggie removed the spark-plug. She scrubbed it with a wire brush. "This feels slippery, like porcelain. Same as a toilet, right?" She asked. Her interest sparked. "What's next?"

"Let's check the air filter."

"Right, it keeps dirt out of the motor. Dad, hand me the Phillips screwdriver."

We were on a roll. She removed the air filter and knocked out dirt and grass. I showed her how to reinstall it.

"What's next?"

"Oil change," I said. "I'll insert the siphon hose to suck out the dirty oil. Give it 15

pumps."

She pumped the siphon without spilling oil, taking pride in her work. Maggie's eyes focused on the oil flowing through the hose.

I speculated she appreciated learning these practical skills. Surely, she would realize the value of fixing something herself; and she'd have the gratification that comes with it. She will thank me someday and I'll have a lawnmower mechanic in the family.

"How much oil does it need?"

I showed her the fill line on the dip stick. "Careful, not too much," I advised.

I blew up a lawnmower once. I thought a shotgun went off and nearly had to change my underwear.

Maggie filled the oil tank and replaced the cap. I started the engine. The motor hummed.

"Are we done?" She asked. "Mosquitoes are biting me."

"Yes, but don't leave."

Maggie's eyes studied mine. Her smile straightened and then sank into a frown.

"Lawnmower noise bothers mosquitoes, so scare 'em off. It's now ready for YOU to push it."

Dad taught me well.

