



# Why don't we love housework? It can do so much for us

## THE SUBTLE BENEFITS OF CLEANING THE BATHROOM

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March 3, 2023

<https://mercatornet.com/why-dont-we-love-housework-it-can-do-so-much-for-us/83382/>

Housework is essential work. Somehow, meals have to be prepared, grocery shopping done, the bathroom cleaned, the children's homework supervised.

But how important is it to us, compared with the demands of paid employment? Can we ever enjoy it? Or is serving dinner just "more work" that further depletes our resources after a taxing day at the office?

To explore attitudes to housework, the London-based [Home Renaissance Foundation](#) partnered with the [International Work and Family Centre of IESE Business School](#) (ICWF) in a study of 65 couples in the Anglosphere, with children, and both working full-time outside the home.

Carolyn Moynihan asked lead researcher Mireia Las Heras, Director of ICWF, to explain some of the study findings and what they mean for the individual, family and employers.

**Are home and the market really in competition for our best work? Are "work" and "life" just a balancing act?**

Work and family are not in competition, and so we should not strive for balance, but for integration. These are two different things. Balancing is about weighing two equal things, but professional or paid work and family are not equal, and they are not in competition either. They are two dimensions of our life that should enrich each other.

Our studies show that when we commit to our work, with the competencies it demands – such as

capacity to see problems, to solve problems, to make decisions, to project into the future, to manage projects – lots of things that we develop when we are working – we can also bring them to our family and social life.

At the same time, we develop a lot of competencies in our personal and family life: empathy, ability to communicate, understanding of different needs, different emotions. And these also allow us to be [better at our paid job](#), where we are always working with other people – clients, colleagues, subordinates, people who provide some kind of service and so on. So, the way we live at home can make us a better employee or manager.

Other studies also show that work and family are not necessarily in conflict but can enrich each other, making both family and social life and working life better ([see infographic](#)).

This doesn't mean it is easy, or that this is the norm. We see a lot of situations in which work and family are competing for resources, such as time, energy, attention, even money. In those circumstances work may be depleting our resources and making our life more miserable rather than rich, happy and successful.

**The English poet Philip Larkin wrote: “Why should I let the toad work Squat on my life?” Awfully cynical! Did the people in your study enjoy housework? Were there differences between men and women in attitudes to this essential work?**

We found that people do not really enjoy, love or look forward to doing housework. It's not that they dread it, or hate it, either. In fact, they might like doing it some days, or like certain tasks, but not others.

It's interesting that, on the whole, men and women do not differ much in their [enjoyment of housework](#). There is more difference among men and women 20 to 35 years old, where we find that women in general tend to like housework more than men do.

There is also a difference between younger and older men. The older men are, the more interested they tend to be in having a very clean house. But for women it's the opposite: after age 35 they tend to become more lenient and flexible about housework ([see infographic](#)).

**What's behind this general lukewarmness towards cooking the dinner and cleaning the house, and what is the remedy?**

What I think this shows is that people do not have enough resources – that is, the time and energy – to do housework. People are working very long hours, spending a lot of time commuting, and feeling stressed because of the demands of work.

But they could like housework a lot more – cleaning, keeping things tidy, cooking, gardening – if they had the time and energy. Our study suggests that there are many food and shopping behaviours, for instance, that conserve time energy and so make housework more enjoyable.

So, in the morning you plan what the family will have for dinner at night; or prepare dishes ahead of time for whenever you need them. You may plan meals for the entire week, and make a shopping list so that you know exactly what to buy.

In other words, you put your brain to work before you start on a task, and this proactivity makes it more enjoyable to do these kinds of jobs.

**Your study found that there are benefits for [children](#) when parents have a positive attitude to housework. Could you tell us more about that?**

Yes, we found that people with a positive attitude to the work of the home are more involved with their children. In the first place, they are people who are more willing to care about details, to take care of material things and the wellbeing of others. So, they are more willing and able to realise what others need, and specifically their children.

Secondly, they are people who realise the importance of caring for others, serving others. And this makes sense, because caring about housework is not basically about caring for material things but for the wellbeing of the people who will be using those things, whether it is cleaner rooms, cooking, laundry or other household tasks.

**Have the Covid pandemic and working from home made things better or worse on the home front?**

The Covid pandemic itself clearly made things much worse, not only because of housework but because people had to homeschool their kids, telecommute without having all the necessary technology, and so on.

Since then, things have become a little better because companies have become more flexible and more willing to accept hybrid work that allows for telecommuting as well as working on site.

For some people this has been a big change in their lives, freeing up time otherwise spent in commuting or perhaps more or less wasted in the office. That time can now be spent not only on housework but also on themselves – keeping doctors' appointments, exercising, sleeping a bit more – so they are less exhausted and can enjoy housework more.

## **What about the mobile phone – friend or foe to family wellbeing? How can we reduce ‘phubbing’ (phone snubbing)?**

The cellphone or smartphone is neither a friend nor an enemy; it’s whatever we want to make of it, a question of being in control of when we carry it, when we use it and how we use it.

During the pandemic it was a vital means of communication. In general it allows us to communicate, work remotely, provide service to clients and colleagues, and to work in a very efficient way.

But if we are not really able to disconnect because we feel forced to be always available, or we are addicted to the technology, then it pushes us towards isolation. We find ourselves phubbing, ignoring others in favour of our personal screen. We don’t listen, we don’t look, we don’t pay attention to the person with whom we are supposedly interacting – during dinner, or relaxing time or in a conversation ([see infographic](#)).

In our research we found two things that predict [overuse of the smartphone](#). First, when we perceive that our employer expects us to be always available to respond. To overcome this we need to clarify with others the timeframe in which we will actually be available, say, 8am to 4pm. Outside those hours we respond only to really urgent matters.

Secondly, overuse occurs when people are under pressure, especially financial pressure, and afraid of losing their job. In these circumstances it is important to be clear what really is expected, and even more what is recommended – that is, being aware ourselves that responding very quickly to the manager, or whoever, generates unnecessary communication that increases rather than relieves stress.

We recommend that companies and schools support the efforts of families to disconnect from their phones and screens during meals and leisure time spent together so as to foster relationships within the family and with others.

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