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Population & Societies

'I set the table every day': The contribution of 10-year-olds to domestic tasks

Ariane Pailhé* and Anne Solaz*

Cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry are everyday chores of family life. While adults perform most of these tasks, children can also lend a hand. As part of the Elfe survey, a sample of 10-year-olds were asked, in the first ever question of its kind in France, about their participation. What tasks do they perform? Does their contribution vary by sex, family type, or social category?

Children's contribution to household domestic tasks varies from one family to another [1] according to their income, constraints, and childrearing principles. Some parents make very few demands on their children, giving priority to play and schoolwork. Some ask for their help with specific tasks. Others consider that children must make a reasonable contribution⁽¹⁾ to domestic life, a goal they achieve with varying degrees of cooperation and success. Children are not always enthusiastic and may try to negotiate with their parents or deploy avoidance tactics. For some child development specialists, sharing domestic chores among all household members provides a way for children to 'do family', to assume responsibility, to acquire a sense of duty and the common good, and to learn skills that are useful in adulthood [2].

In reality, how much do 10-year-olds contribute to domestic work in France today? What tasks do they perform? Do boys' and girls' contributions differ by family characteristics or the gender division of housework between the parents? Data from the Elfe child cohort study (see Box and [3]), which interviewed children aged 10 and 11 born in mainland France, can be used to measure, for the first time, their participation in several types of domestic tasks and to link their characteristics and those of their family.

(1) The International Labour Organization points out that if the extent of domestic tasks is excessive or interferes with children's other needs, such as education, this workload may be likened to child labour and become a cause for concern: <https://www.ilo.org/international-programme-elimination-child-labour-ipecc/sectors-and-topics/child-labour-and-domestic-work>

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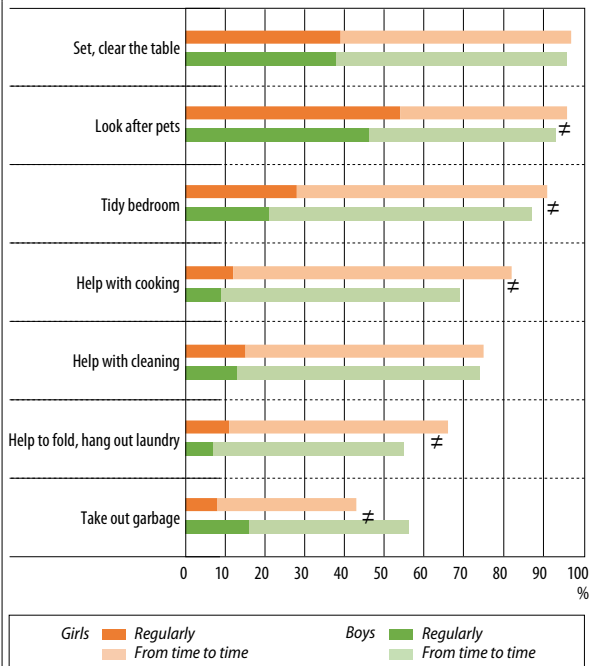
Practically all children set or clear the table

Two of the listed tasks are typically performed by children: setting or clearing the table and, among families that have them (72%), looking after pets. Almost all children (9 in 10) report doing one of these two tasks at least occasionally, and a large share do so daily: 4 in 10 children set the table every day, and 5 in 10 look after pets. Tidying their bedroom, or the bedroom shared with siblings, is another task performed by 9 in 10 children. A quarter tidy it every week. These activities concern their own personal space and life, as much as that of the family as a whole. Children also help their parents with other domestic tasks: more than 6 in 10 report helping with cooking or cleaning, and half help to fold or hang out the laundry. A smaller proportion (4 in 10) help to take out the garbage. These four tasks are also more occasional; only 1 child out of 10 performs them weekly.

Boys contribute less than girls

At age 10, children's contribution to domestic tasks differs by sex. For the majority of the listed tasks, girls participate more than boys (Figure 1). Boys set and clear the table as often as girls, while a larger share of girls look after pets, tidy their bedroom, and help with laundry and cooking. They also perform these tasks more frequently. Taking out the garbage is the only task more often performed by boys. This gendered division of tasks by type reflects that observed among adults: adult women take primary responsibility for care, cooking, cleaning, and laundry in the home. Men are slightly more involved in tasks performed outdoors [4, 5].

Figure 1. Participation of 10-year-olds in domestic tasks (%)



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Note: The symbol ≠ indicates that, for this task, girls' participation is significantly different from that of boys at the 5% level.

Source: Elfe, survey at 10.5 years, INED–INSERM (2022). Weighted data.

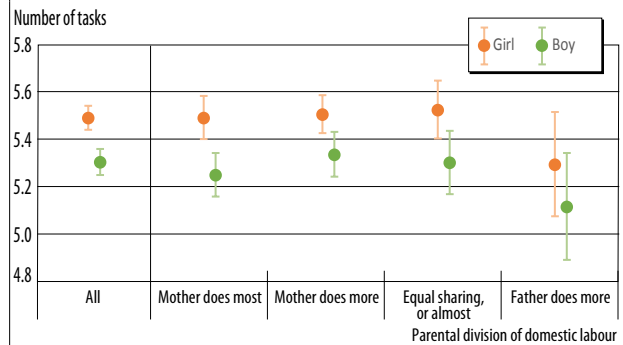
These gender differences at age 10 partly mirror the common pattern of domestic task sharing between parental couples (Figure 2).⁽²⁾ In families where the mother does most of the domestic work, boys do slightly fewer tasks than girls. This is also the case when it is shared equally between the parents, or the mother does slightly more. In the small share of families where the father does more domestic work than the mother, the children help with fewer tasks, whatever their sex, perhaps because the father's larger contribution means that less help is needed. Other studies have shown that the father's involvement in the domestic sphere encourages a more equal gender division in adolescence [6].

Only children contribute less, and those with two or more siblings contribute more

Children's participation in domestic tasks is linked to family type. Only children, boys and girls alike, participate less than those with siblings, except in looking after pets (Figure 3). Only children have pets (75%) more often than other children (71%) and more often look after them. Children's help with setting and clearing the table, cleaning, and taking out the garbage increas-

(2) The division of domestic labour in the parental couple was observed during the previous survey round, when the children were around 5 years old. A composite indicator of the parental division of labour was built, based on five tasks: dish washing, shopping, meal preparation, doing laundry, and cleaning. In 3 in 4 families, the woman does more domestic tasks than the man (in 38% she does most of them and in 38% more than half), and in 17% they are shared equally. In 7% of families, the man does more than the woman.

Figure 2. Number of tasks performed by child's sex and parental division of domestic labour



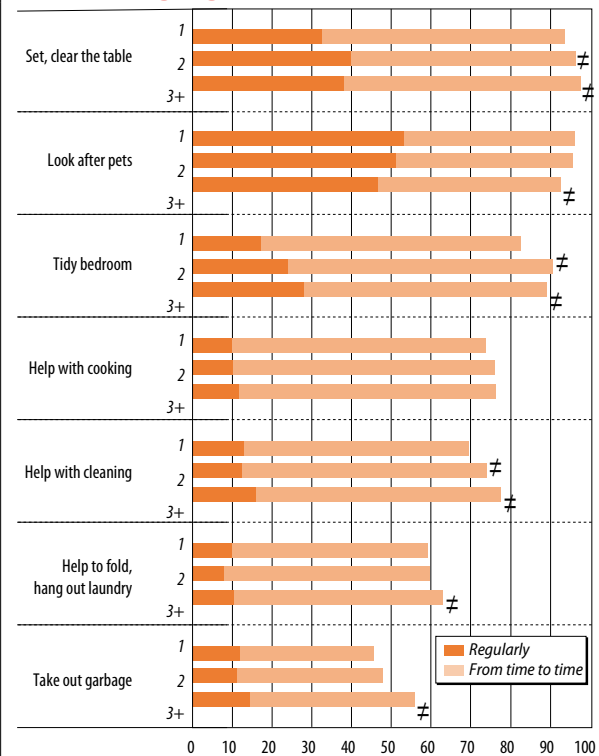
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Notes: Poisson regression on number of tasks performed, 95% confidence intervals.

Interpretation: In families where the mother does most of the domestic tasks, girls perform 5.5 of the tasks listed in the survey, on average, and boys 5.2.

Source: Elfe, survey at 10.5 years, INED–INSERM (2022). Weighted data.

Figure 3. Children's participation by number of siblings aged under 18 in the household



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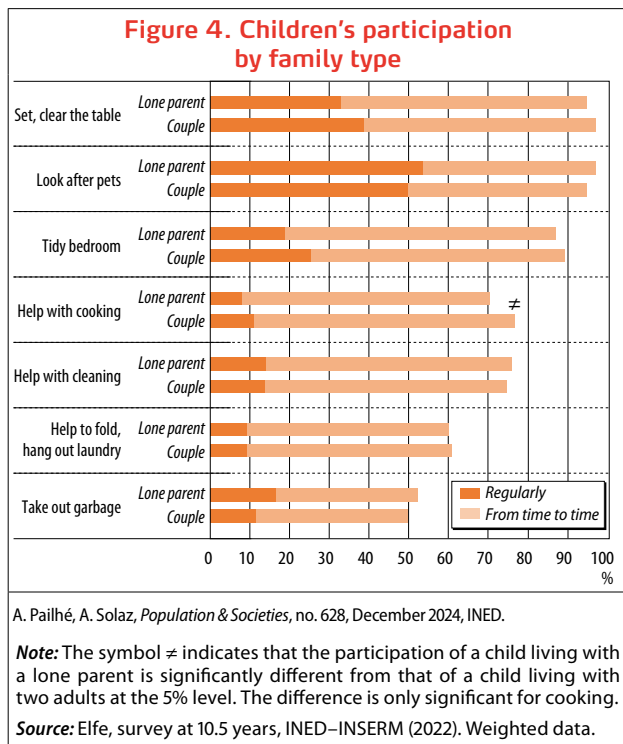
Note: The symbol ≠ indicates that for this task, the participation children with siblings differs significantly from that of only children at the 5% level.

Source: Elfe, survey at 10.5 years, INED–INSERM (2022). Weighted data.

es with the number of siblings. They are given more tasks to do when the total domestic workload is greater. In families with three or more children, the parents may organize job 'rotas' or ask the children to do tasks together as a means to foster equality between the siblings and a sense of communal living.

In families of two children or more, their sex composition has only a marginal impact: brothers cook slightly more often when they outnumber sisters, and sisters take out the garbage slightly more often when the reverse is true. While children with younger siblings more often tidy their bedroom, they tend to help less with cooking and cleaning than children of the same age with older siblings. Ten-year-olds with older siblings are probably asked to contribute to housework at a younger age, either to share the work with their older brothers and sisters, or because a rota is in place.

While one might assume that lone parents ask for more help from their children in the absence of a partner, this is not the case (Figure 4). Children in lone-parent families—in most cases living with their mother—tend to help less with cooking than children living with an adult couple (either the parents or a parent and step-parent), even after controlling for socio-economic characteristics and family size. They help to the same extent with other tasks. This can be explained in several ways. In lone-parent families, meal preparation may be simpler and less time-consuming. It may also be more difficult for lone parents to persuade their children to lend a hand. And perhaps lone mothers or fathers do not wish to overburden their children with domestic tasks.

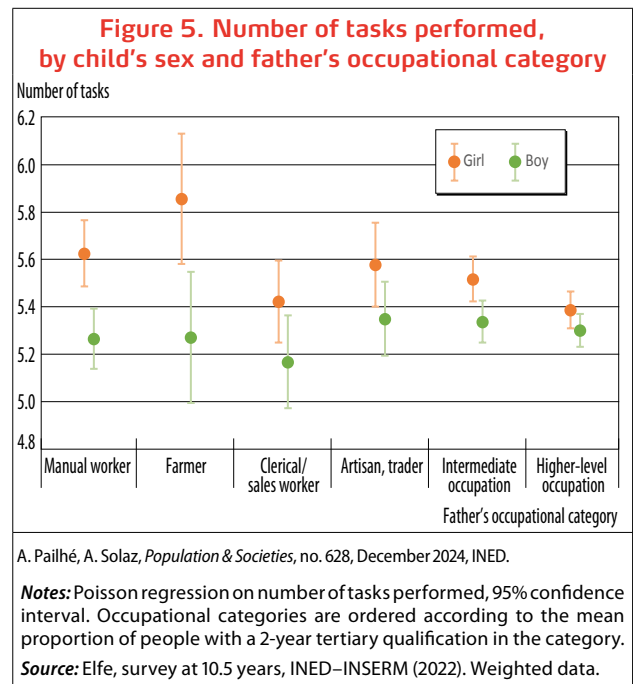


Do children's contributions differ by family type? The case of children living in alternating residence after parental separation, living half the time with their father and half with their mother, is particularly interesting in this respect. The majority of children (62%) in alternating residence report participating equally in both homes, boys more so than girls (66% vs. 57%), while 25% report helping more at their mother's home than

at their father's and 14% the reverse. They may be asked to participate more by their mother (and less by their stepmother if the father has a new partner) or more frequently offer to help her.

Girls' participation differs by social category

Boys' participation in domestic tasks and the types of tasks they perform do not vary by social category (Figure 5). They perform a similar number of tasks, whatever their father's occupational category.⁽³⁾ For girls, the pattern is slightly different. Those whose father is a farmer or manual worker perform more tasks because girls in working-class families are more frequently asked to provide help [1]. They more often perform collective tasks such as setting the table, caring for pets, helping with cooking, doing the laundry, and cleaning. Girls with parents in higher-level occupations more often tidy their bedroom by themselves but provide less help with cleaning, laundry, and garbage, partly because these families more often have a paid domestic helper to do the housework (21% vs. 11%, on average). It is in this group that the gender differences are smallest. They are largest in families where the father is a manual worker or farmer, even after taking account of the parental division of domestic labour. The mother's social category, on the other hand, has no impact, and the effect of her employment status is small: children with an inactive or unemployed mother participate slightly less in cooking and tidying activities than those whose mother works. Children's participation depends to a limited extent on the mother's educational level: gender differences are larger for children with a low-educated mother.



(3) The father's occupational category is recorded when the child is age 10 if the father lives with the child, or in earlier survey waves if otherwise.

Soliciting the children's help: pocket money and/or praise?

Parents may apply different methods to solicit their children's participation. Overall, one-third of parents give their children pocket money for help with chores or jobs around the house, boys slightly more often than girls, and more frequently in families where the father is a farmer, artisan, trader, or manual worker than in those where he is in a higher-level occupation. Around half of parents report always praising their children when they help with domestic tasks, those in higher-level occupations and artisans/traders slightly more than the others. These rewards, financial or symbolic, are positively associated with children's greater participation in the listed routine domestic tasks.

At age 10, girls and boys differ in terms of their participation in domestic tasks, partly reproducing the gender inequalities observed among parents. These differences are smaller at this age than in adolescence and vary slightly by social category. They may reflect differing conceptions of childhood and education, and varying degrees of family adherence to the egalitarian norm. Beyond family level, they also stem from gendered representations in the broader environment of child socialization (media, school, sport, etc.).

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Box. The French Longitudinal Study of Children: The Elfe survey

The data used for this study are drawn from the Elfe cohort of children born in 2011 [3]. The Elfe project is following these children from birth to adulthood, examining numerous aspects of their life from social, health, and environmental perspectives. The children were interviewed face-to-face between January and September 2022 when they were aged between 10 and 11. A total of 7,361 children answered several questions on domestic tasks that can potentially be performed by children:

- Do you set or clear the table?
- In your home, who looks after the pets?
- Do you tidy your bedroom by yourself?
- Do you help with the cooking?
- Do you help to hang out or fold the laundry?
- Do you help with cleaning?
- Do you take the garbage out?

The response categories were: *every day* (for the first two questions) or *every week* (for the five others), *from time to time*, and *never*. The every day and every week categories correspond to the 'regularly' item. An indicator of the number of tasks performed (regularly or from time to time) was also constructed, with the participation of children who do not have pets being counted as the mean of those who do. Children living in alternating residence were also asked whether they participated more or to the same extent at the home of one or other parent.

Parents, for their part, were asked how they responded to their child's participation in domestic tasks, i.e. whether they praised their child for providing help (*Never/Almost never/Sometimes/Often/Always*). The survey asked parents who sometimes gave pocket money to their child whether they did so when the child had helped with a chore or done a job (washed the car, watered the garden, tidied, etc.).

The data were adjusted (weighted) to be representative of all children born in France in 2011. The results of the descriptive statistics are presented, but only the differences significant at the 5% level are discussed.

Abstract

A large majority of 10-year-olds report providing regular or occasional help with domestic tasks. Some chores, such as setting and clearing the table, are children's preserve. Children with two or more siblings participate more than only children. Boys and girls do not perform the same types or number of tasks, with girls doing more than boys. When the father performs a larger share of domestic tasks than the mother, the differences between boys and girls are smaller.

Keywords

child, family, Elfe, domestic tasks, gender, boy, girl, teenager, housework, cooking