



THE HEARTBEAT OF HOMESTEADING

It is Friday night, our weekly family dinner night; the dining room walls are practically bulging with the activity they contain. Around the table, the family gathers as I take it all in from the kitchen. Elvin, my husband, at the head of the table, talks with a son-in-law about the engine in one of the trucks; our three daughters discuss a recent wedding in the family and the pending birth of the first grandchild; my ears pick up a couple statistics of a favorite sport and the verbal sparring of the younger children, who are elbowing each other for a position at the table and in the conversation.

The aroma of browned butter and homegrown beef permeates the air. As I place the final dish onto the laden table, I wipe my hands with a corner of my apron before removing it and hanging it on the hook. I seat myself at the table next to Elvin, place my hand in his, and expectantly wait for the familiar hush that will happen when the family takes notice that the meal is ready, the cook is seated, and we are ready to pray the prayer of thanks.

I take a deep breath and hold it for a second as if by inhaling and holding I can somehow keep this moment with me for eternity. This is it, I think; we are doing it! The years of toil and tears are paying off, and we are beginning to see the rewards for our efforts. Thoughts of thankfulness are now forever intertwined in my memory with the flavors of the meal and the comfort of conversation with family. I whisper a silent prayer of praise to the Father who walked with us every step of the way, for the days his love and faithfulness carried us. For the times he whispered encouragement to keep swimming against the current when all we wanted was to drift effortlessly downstream with the masses and rest our weary bodies and

minds. For the wisdom he supplied at just the right time, and most of all, for the endurance he supplied to get us to this point of gratitude and joy in the journey.

Our reason for this way of life is not about the homegrown beef in the cast-iron dish. It is not about the homemade noodles or the garden-fresh peas and potatoes. It is not about the raw milk pudding we will have for dessert. It is about the family! The eternal souls that, at this moment, rest their feet under our table. Contrary to what many may think, we did not set out to grow the majority of our own food, and homesteading simply wasn't in our plans or even our vocabulary for many years. We simply set out to raise our family to have a hardy work ethic, a large dose of ingenuity, and the resourcefulness and skills needed to be a blessing to the world around them. We set out to raise children who will worship the Creator, have a heart for the unloved, and develop the emotional stability to be part of the solution. We set out to foster a family culture of togetherness, generosity, and servanthood.



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OUR STARTING LINE

In numerous conversations, Elvin and I identified what we felt was significant in developing our character during our childhoods in the Old Order Mennonite families we grew up in: chores. There were cows to milk, eggs to gather, and dishes to wash—all before we rode our bikes to the one-room school each day. After school there were stalls to muck and more animals to feed, and there was laundry to do.

So, this is where we put our stake as the starting line for our family. Our children needed chores! The sole reason we ordered our first baby chicks was so our preschool-age daughters could learn to care for the needs of creatures other than themselves. I clearly remember those chickens becoming quite large before we finally harvested them, because the goal was not chicken in the freezer, the goal was

the development of character in our children through responsibility.

As our family grew, the garden grew larger to accommodate their skills, and we added more animals to keep more children busy. We found ourselves purchasing more canning jars, another freezer, and additional fencing. Our family began to thrive in every way imaginable—not because everything went perfectly but simply because we were working together. Long hours spent in God’s creation working in the soil, joyfully watching baby animals being born, and crying together over the losses of favorite animals or crops. As we watched our family thrive, we became inspired to look back to the old-fashioned culture of the first twenty-seven years of our lives for more insight into the slower-paced lifestyle that was conducive to reaching the family goals we were fully committed to achieving.

A few years ago, a friend and I were sitting in our backyard, snacking on homemade bread from my kitchen topped with butter made from our cows’ raw milk and fresh jam made with strawberries from our garden.

“You are a true homesteader,” she told me.

Confused, I asked for clarification, since, as far as I knew, the word *homesteader* was used in reference to those early American settlers who received land through working to improve it. Amused, my friend encouraged me to look up the hashtag #homesteading on social media, and that is when I discovered that there were hundreds and thousands of families seeking and actively working to recover the lost skills of their ancestors.

In the pages that follow, I hope that by sharing a bit of our journey I will not add more noise to a world that’s already clamoring for your time, attention, and resources; rather, that through stories, simple recipes, our trials and errors, and Grandma’s timeless wisdom, I will bring a quiet focus that helps you hear the very heartbeat behind the homesteading lifestyle.



ZIMMERMAN

◆ CHAPTER ONE ◆







GUIDED BY HOMESTEAD GOALS

Working together as a family

The climb from my childhood house down to the Conestoga creek was a treacherous one for an eight-year-old girl with a fishline in hand. My brother, older than me by two years, led the way with a fishline in one hand and tackle box in the other. We trekked a well-worn trail, and I knew every branch and rock foothold that we needed to get safely up and down the bank. The stretch of the Conestoga River that bordered our property was by no means a dangerous river; our carefulness while going up and down the bank was to avoid making a crash landing into the water like we did on swimming days.

We did not want to scare the fish away! After reaching the fishing hole, it was time to start flipping over rocks to find some bait for our lines. We were looking for earthworms, beetles, or the tails that the salamanders left behind in their rush to escape us.

On this day, my brother and I had the goal of catching a couple fish before Mom's whistle called us to take care of more chores. There were sure to be weeds to pull in the strawberry patch, horse stalls to muck, or potatoes to peel for dinner. However, for that moment we were free to follow our own interests, indulge our curiosity, and amuse ourselves. The knowledge that our free play was limited helped



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us to cherish this time and use it wisely.

While as a child I couldn't have pinpointed the reason why I thrived, I now see how the homestead life gave us a balance of both playing together and doing chores together. We shared in co-creating our homestead experience. My enjoyable childhood has helped me to remain steadfast in providing opportunities for my kids to have similar times of exploration and unstructured play as well as the many lessons and benefits of chores.

I will admit that it hasn't always been easy. In the early years of managing chores with my own children, I often became frustrated with their bickering and whining when I made requests or when they ran out of steam before the assigned task was completed. I started to believe the lie that I wasn't a good mom and might as well give up. I lashed out at the children's less-than-willing attitudes instead of leaning into the Word of God and trying to understand the truth of raising children of principle.

Ephesians 6:4 teaches, "Do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." When I began the practice of viewing our daily homestead goals and chores as the daily opportunity to cultivate a righteous life, not only in myself but in our children as well, God gave me a much larger, future-reaching vision. No longer was an afternoon about weeding the garden; it was an opportunity for all of us to cultivate our character. It was an opportunity for me to trust that although there were complaints or grumblings, I wasn't failing as a parent. Even when the children entered the garden in ashes and sackcloth as they mourned the hour of play they had lost, I was being invited to work on my strength of spirit and character as I regulated my emotions and responded to them in a way that reflected the truth that we were working on a much larger goal than just weeding the garden.

A HEALTHY FAMILY SETS GOALS

Over the years, I have come to realize that when people express overwhelm or bafflement at the thought of a family our size, a primary



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reason is because they're envisioning their own grocery bills, gym memberships, and wardrobe costs multiplied by the number of children they see around my shopping cart. They are imagining the occasional chaos of mealtimes and bedtimes and the battles of wills faced when it is homework time. Because they cannot fit the size of our family into the only lifestyle, budget, routines, and goals they are familiar with, they conclude that it can't be done—or it can't possibly be done joyfully, successfully, and with healthy results for all.

But the truth is, there are meaningful, doable ways through all seasons of parenting. Whether you have one child or ten, you can grow a homestead family of healthy, whole children—and adults, let's not forget ourselves—by setting long-term goals that guide your choices and echo your principles and priorities.

First, we set the goals. While you may have other categories, the core ones we focus on are:

- *Strength of spirit*
- *Strength of body*
- *Strength of mind*
- *Strength of character*
- *Strength of family*

The most effective long-term goals are simple. When we, as parents, are holding up every decision against the goal, we want it to be straightforward so no matter the ages of our children or the stage of family life we're in, we know when a choice or priority measures up.

The best goals allow for different personalities, interests, and gifts to flourish and for God to work individually in the life of each child, giving plenty of room for each member of the family to make mistakes, recognize those mistakes and misjudgments, and correct their actions.

A simple family goal kept in the forefront of your mind, for each life category, will be like a single beacon of light, helping you make



confident decisions as you go about your day. For example, if our goal is for our children to flourish in faith and be spiritually strong, then we teach them to pray and have a love for God's Word, and we make sure to set an example of spiritual priorities, such as family devotions, church, and youth group activities.

If our goal is strength of body, then we focus on providing the kind of nutritional support and opportunities for exercise that help us stay out of the doctor's office as much as possible.

If our goal is for our children to have an insatiable curiosity that spurs a lifelong joy of discovery and learning, then we make sure to protect their free play and create an environment of training, learning, and encouragement.

If our goal is to instill character, then we must fashion our days in a way that leaves time to work together on correcting mistakes and makes room for do-overs rather than simply rushing through to check things off a list.

If our goal is to foster strong family connections and relationships, then we may limit what children are involved in beyond the home so there aren't too many missed opportunities to work, dine, and play together as a family.

We adjust our lifestyle to fit our long-term goals.

FOLLOWING THE LIGHT OF YOUR GOALS

Take time to consider and name your goals. Discuss, shape, and clarify each one so you can return to them again and again. Then think about how to work toward them in practical ways. Following are some examples from my family that I hope will encourage you as you take simple steps to move toward your goals.

Strength of Spirit

Are my daily habits and attitude drawing the hearts of my family toward God for strength, help, and courage? Am I first teaching them how to pray before I offer a solution to a problem? Am I showing by example how to regulate my emotions in a frustrating situation?

As the beam of light that is your family's goal illuminates your days, you will find at the center a bright spot from which all other light reflects; without this bright spot, you simply have no light at all. This bright spot is the peace, will, and presence of God, and it will bring warmth and comfort to all who bask in it. The more time we, as parents, spend here, the more our family, drawn to us by relationship, is drawn to God's peace and wisdom.

Strength of Body

When I am shopping or cooking meals for the family, I hold the meals and shopping list up against the goal of strength of body. Is the nourishment and immune system support my family will receive from this food worth the price I am paying for it? Does the item and the price adequately justify the time it took to earn that amount of money? And finally, does this product and its ingredients support our long-term goal of healthy bodies?

My answers to these questions often inspire me to find a way to make a more nutritious version of a food, using my time instead of spending my money so that I can fill our pantry not only with select, healthy grocery store choices but also offerings from the homestead harvest.

Strength of Mind

The discipline of one's mind is a lifelong work that begins very early in life. Helping a child develop this strength looks a lot like asking them to give just a bit more when they decide they've had enough of a job. For example, assign jobs that you know are larger than the child's endurance or attention span; in this way you first give them the opportunity to stretch themselves to their own limit, and then, when they ask to quit, you can cheerfully say, "You've done a great job. If you mow to this edge of the house then you can quit."

When a child receives consistent praise, not only for a job well done but also for their self-discipline, they begin to learn to discipline their own mind.



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Strength of Character

In our home, we view this practice as the ability to make God-honoring choices regardless of the influences around us. A person of strong character shows compassion, respect, and self-discipline in the face of adversity. The development of character in children flourishes with two components: the unconditional love and acceptance of their families and the examples of adults in their lives. And although it will develop slowly over a lifetime, the standards of character are set in those early years.

Strength of Family

Relationships are an important cornerstone of life, and every future relationship a child has will be built upon the experience of their first family relationships. Because relationships are best built upon shared experiences, it is important to incorporate as many as possible into our family life, such as dining together, working and playing together, and even settling differences.

The light of our long-term goal shining through behaviors paints a clear picture of what that behavior, if it becomes a habit, will look like in an adult. Seeing this allows me to help a child make small adjustments over time to get them lined up with our goal, while reminding myself not to expect perfection but to be happy with small improvements in line with each child's natural development.



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As you journey toward your goals, stay encouraged and return to simple steps. With growth, practice, and maturity, each member of the family will find their way closer to the center of the beam of light that is your goal.

CHILDHOOD CHORES AND YOUR FAMILY'S GOALS

Childhood chores were commonplace in the Mennonite culture of my childhood. There was the family cow to milk, there were dishes to wash, animals and humans to feed, and there was the weekly Saturday deep cleaning of the home. And although I alone didn't carry the burden of checking these chores off the list, I was responsible for doing what I was asked to do, when I was asked to do it. Most chores were done with a sibling or two to lighten the load and make the job more fun, and we had "big workdays" when the entire family would work toward a shared goal, such as harvesting chickens, preserving the harvest, or shelling peas.

Big workdays are at the core of many of my childhood memories. I do not remember the work as much as I do the camaraderie of the family. What felt like mundane and never-ending chores around the farm to ten-year-old me was really the feeling of developing the very character upon which my adult life is built!

When the mind is growing, the body has a need to be active. And when an activity has a purpose, a direction, and a goal, the developing brain forms strong connections that add up to lifelong skills and strengths.

Very young children are great at challenging themselves in both mental and physical ways with imaginary play. They learn to love the feeling of accomplishment they get from mastering small tasks. These small tasks turn into bigger ones, and eventually they feel they have mastered everything there is to conquer and are ready for more interesting challenges.



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This next stage can be a frustrating one, as it suddenly requires more effort and forethought from parents. Children become bored with their current surroundings. They seem to lack creativity and imagination, and boredom sets in. Boredom is simply the search for a dopamine reward. Dopamine is one of the “feel good” hormones. This hormone helps us to stay alert, improves our focus, and boosts our creativity, just to name a few benefits. We all subconsciously chase that dopamine reward and naturally return to the place we last received this reward.



Growth toward goals is a long, slow development requiring many hours of practice and patience.

It is important to not respond to boredom with entertainment. Although entertainment gives a small dopamine reward, it often fails to challenge the mind or body and leaves us craving bigger and better entertainment. We must protect the developing brain from the artificial highs of video games and screen time. Every time a child satisfies their neurological need for a reward this way, they undermine the natural curiosity that directs their developing brains to find satisfaction in lifelong skills based on capability, leadership, and a strong work ethic.

As parents, it's not our job to fill every moment with activities or entertainment but rather to notice when a child needs a new challenge, something to conquer, and then to offer the opportunity through chores. The antidote for a child's boredom is a chore because a job well done will give them a dopamine reward that stimulates creativity, alertness, and focus. When a child learns to chase that dopamine high of a “job well done,” they tend to rush through chores, taking shortcuts along the way, just to get to that high. This is a normal stage of development, and I, to this day, still find myself taking shortcuts occasionally because I am after that same dopamine reward! When the reward is gained not by rushing but through the satisfaction of contributing and successfully completing a challenging task, that becomes the goal they aim for.

Creativity and curiosity will displace boredom all day long! Childhood chores continue to stimulate the need to conquer and



master and give purpose and direction long after the child has outgrown the stage of imaginary play. For example, making the bed, peeling potatoes, and sweeping the floor are large accomplishments for a five-year-old child, but when they master these they will quickly become bored and subconsciously begin seeking another challenge.

After more than twenty years of parenting, I have learned that my kids' bickering and whining are the very sounds of their character developing. If my children don't have opportunities to complain about a chore, then I must consider that they might not have enough of or the right type of chores to grow and develop character.



Once we recognize the significant role that childhood chores play in creating successful adults, we can shift our focus from a performance-based objective (checking jobs off a list) to one of developing lifelong character and skills. These lifelong skills take time and practice to put down deep roots that will serve a child well. We don't ever expect perfection, but we do expect growth. Growth toward goals is a long, slow development requiring many hours of practice and patience. The chores of the home and homestead are merely the tools used.

No matter which childhood chores are available to your family, implementing them into your children's routines helps them develop toward your long-term goals, and while working on those character skills through chores, they will be picking up a great set of life skills.

CHORES DON'T NEED TO BE A CHORE

It is not hard to convince most parents that chores can build character and support a family's goals. More difficult, however, is to convince them that their kids will actually do the chores. If you're a bit skeptical yourself or you've had problems before, I promise, there is a way. You just have to start, be consistent, and extend a lot of grace to yourself and your children. No matter if you're introducing chores to a child who is three or thirteen, the process is the same—start small

and build on the skills mastered. When a child masters feeding a pet or homestead animal, then we add another chore to that. In this way, as the child grows in physical strength and the brain development takes place, the chores assigned keep them growing and challenged.

When a child is new to chores, my husband and I work closely beside them, allowing our own positive attitude about chores to set the tone. We're careful not to criticize and, instead, always encourage them to grow and master the skill. We avoid being legalistic about the way a chore is done and instead help the child understand the result of the chore in such a way that they can choose for themselves how to get the desired outcome.

We make this last part very simple and clear:

Here is the result we want . . .

Here is the way I do it.

And then we leave the child to develop their own method.

When we leave a child to develop their own system of doing a chore, we stay close enough to give redirection or reminders to prevent any bad habits from settling in but not so involved that the chore remains or becomes our responsibility.

The willing but not able stage: Toddler and preschool years. By bringing the toddler or preschooler alongside your work, praising them for efforts and helpfulness, you are sending the message that they are a necessary part of the home and homestead's daily operations. You will be able to build upon this foundation of belonging through the next two stages. This is a very important stage and should be valued for willingness rather than strength or skill.

The able but not willing stage: Elementary ages. You will know it when your child gets to this stage. Trying to make you believe that they lack ability, strength, and skill seems to be the goal for this age group. This age group gets quickly overwhelmed with lengthy chores, and it is important to work side by side with them on bigger jobs.

For example: Washing the family's dinner dishes looks overwhelming to an eleven-year-old. The child shifts their goal to getting



out of the chore by feigning incompetence because they don't yet have the experience or brain development to see the bigger goal of getting all the dishes done and getting that dopamine hit of a job well done. I help shift the goal by saying something like, "Let's get a good start and have a good attitude, and then when you get to the pots and pans we will reevaluate the job." In this way we are breaking the job up into smaller bites and giving the goal of a good attitude rather than just a job executed. And then I find work to do in close proximity, helping them a bit here and there to keep them encouraged with my good attitude and positive influence.

The willing and able stage: Also known as the teenage years. This is the golden age of childhood chores and in my experience passes in a flash. Teens have the skills to work like an adult and can make a big difference around the home and homestead. The biggest challenge for this age group is that they have their own ideas on how and when things could get done, and it is helpful to give them the space to set their own goals.

For example, rather than saying, "Come, we are going to clean the pigpen," like you would to a younger child, you will now say something like, "The pigpen really needs to be cleaned. Can you please do it sometime before Saturday?" In this way you are giving them responsibility but allowing them the freedom to refine their time management and taking responsibility skills.

"Complaining is always heard but never rewarded" is a good motto for a parent to have through all stages. By hearing your children's complaints, you are understanding where they are in their development of character and skills and can adjust your expectations accordingly while at the same time encouraging them to grow in strength, skill, and character.

We aren't expecting perfectly executed chores because that serves us well. We are expecting growth of character because that's what will serve the child well for the rest of his or her life.



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KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE

Let's go back to my example of the kids grumbling about having to weed the garden. That time is about so much more than the wellness of a piece of our property. It is an opportunity for my children to develop strength of character, body, spirit, and mind. As we work together in the soil and among the plants, the number one question is, of course, "When will this be over?" I engage them to develop their strength of mind by asking them to keep at it just a bit longer than they think they have the ability or desire to handle. By doing this, I am also encouraging them to stretch and grow their physical endurance—their strength of body. I invite them to build up their character and spirit by requiring a good attitude and asking them to be faithful in honoring my parental authority, their integrity, and the stewardship of God's creation.

We work on the strength of family through shared experiences and shared goals because working together, even when there are less than stellar attitudes, is still a family experience that strengthens relationships.

The homestead life presents many times when a do-it-yourself mindset is the best one. But when it comes to a homestead chore, doing it myself every time will not bear the fruit of a healthy family. I remind myself daily that although doing chores by myself reaches my short-term goals of peace and having things done my way, it is much better to work on our long-term goals by allowing the children to help shoulder the responsibilities and reap the rewards.

After all, life skills aren't created with one job done well; they are created by stringing a whole list of childhood chores (and mistakes) together with time management, responsibility, and work ethic to form a beautiful gift that your child won't fully comprehend until adulthood. Through it all—the challenges and the teaching—our end goal is not for our children to grow up and honor us for their childhood but to become successful and competent adults who bring glory and honor to their heavenly Father.

