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## A shovel-ready job

**Parenting** | *Amy Henry*



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On a recent blistering Kansas day, a group of students and teachers are re-mulching an impossibly long walking path as part of our weekly school workday.

The four girls are told to mulch the path using large plastic pitchforks. The three boys have the job of cutting a straight line in the grass to mark the edge of the path.

The girls start pitching and spreading the mulch, working up a sweat in our disappointingly tree-free spot.

When I check on the boys, I find they have made minimal progress. The problem, I discover, is that they are unfamiliar with their assigned tool: the shovel. The first boy is using one arm to set the blade of the shovel on the grass, wiggling it forward and back with his hands in an attempt to cut the grass. The second and third boys, similarly stumped, are copying boy No. 1 with equal non-success.

Having a father who taught his children how to run a chop saw by the age these kids are (early teens), I wonder what father doesn't teach his son how to use something as basic as a shovel.

Starting Sept. 25, PBS is airing *The Rule*, a documentary about another kind of father, or should I say, *fathers*, Benedictine ones who run a school for boys in inner-city Newark, N.J. The school, following the teachings of St. Benedict and his "ora et labora" philosophy, like my father, believes in turning boys into men via, among other things, hard work. Sixty-percent of the boys at St. Benedict's Prep live without fathers. These monks step into those paternal shoes, making the boys do hard things—like hiking the Appalachian Trail during orientation week.

"The monks are serious about building men," writes former student Steven Malanga. "The boys don't just participate in the community; they eventually help run the school, despite their self-doubts. Seniors supervise freshmen; a student leader, not a priest, runs every morning's convocation; students take attendance and even follow up with absentees."

The obvious truth can't be overstated: Boys need their dads.

With more electronic babysitters at our disposal than at any time in history, we must do more than keep our sons quiet and "out of our hair." We must be more deliberate than ever before to engage our boys in real life. We must pull ourselves away from our screens and our offices and be willing to get dirty cutting wood, dropping engines, changing the oil, making go-karts, building forts, and otherwise inconveniencing

ourselves in the messy, stinky, exhausting job of making men, or, in not too many more years ... *we're not going to have any.*

A counselor at St. Benedict's, when asked how he measured success, answered, "You're able to graduate St. Benedict's, have a mortgage, deal with your marriage, deal with your family, stick it out. How do I measure success? I got a father working with his son, in his son's life."

Maybe it starts with an introduction to the shovel.

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