

Life + Health

THROWBACK



1925

THEN Caring for chickens—so easy a child could do it!

NOW *If only.* In reality, chickens can be messy, smelly and prone to scratching, and kids don't always want to help. Read more about one family's foray into farming in this humorous essay.

WE ADOPTED CHICKENS.

CHAOS ENSUED!

I agreed to get the fowl thinking I'd be teaching my sons about entrepreneurship and environmental stewardship. What we all got was a lesson in flying the coop.

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Mike Garten; prop styling by Alex Mata (main image); Good Housekeeping Archives/May 1925 (throwback); Getty Images (rubber chicken and stars with thought bubbles).



**I WALKED
OUTSIDE TO A
PATIO THAT LOOKED
LIKE IT HAD
BEEN TARRIED AND
FEATHERED.**

**I STEPPED IN CHICKEN POOP AND
REMOVED MY SHOES TO CLEAN
THEM, THEN LANDED IN ANOTHER
FRESH PILE BEHIND ME.**





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**"AS TIME
 WENT ON AND
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Like many families who decide to get baby chicks, we'd underestimated the time commitment—and the filth—inherent in chicken-keeping.

But the birds hadn't been an impulse decision. Our three sons had been masterminding how they were going to run this "business" for months. Their plan: Get three chickens and launch an egg-selling business. They had a name for the enterprise (Let's Get Cracking), a logo (a cracked egg, with a fried egg bursting out between the two halves) and elaborate plans for a grand opening (a backyard brunch with hard-boiled, scrambled and fried eggs as the main course).

"We've got it covered, Mom," said my then-8-year-old when I emphasized the work involved. "You and Dad won't have to do anything. *Promise.*" He and his 10-year-old twin brothers seemed up for the challenge and excited by the idea of earning money by selling fresh eggs.

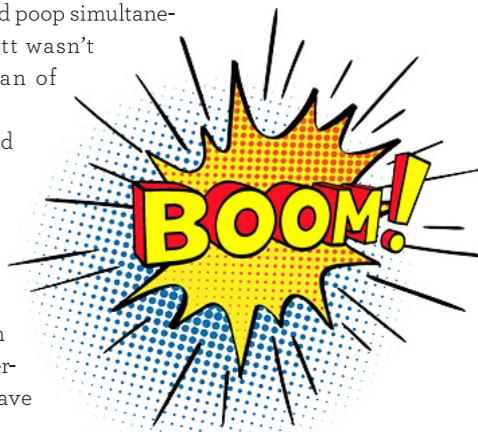
Who was I to squash their entrepreneurial drive? Friends who had been keeping chickens for years assured me that it was easy. "You can even sell the poop to local gardeners for fertilizer," one said, as though pawning off feces for profit was an obvious plus.

Secretly, I was enchanted by the vision of fresh blue and beige eggs on our countertop—not to mention that of adding some females to our all-boy brood. I even envisioned myself, in a floppy hat, escorting my egg-carting boys to the farmers' market to sell their wares.

Despite our boys' promises, my husband, Brandon, feared that the lion's share of the chicken-keeping duties would fall on him (I didn't beg to differ), and he wanted no part of it. "We have to put together a coop and a run and clean it all. And they poop—a lot," he said.

Still, I fantasized about sitting outside at our bistro table, sipping coffee and watching the hens do their thing. In my mind's eye, feathers weren't scattered all over our garden. Watery feces weren't coating my patio. (Chickens, like most birds, pee and poop simultaneously.) And my bull terrier mutt wasn't licking my son's flip-flop clean of chicken excrement.

In the end, my husband cracked under the pressure of three kids and a wife lobbying for hens. I found a chicken farm, and the woman who answered the phone there reeled me in like a starving tuna with images of children delighting in mild-mannered Ameraucanas and Orpingtons. "We have





both breeds,” she said. “Your kiddos can pick out chicks today.”

And that’s how I found myself traveling down a remote road on the first day of spring break with my three boys in tow. When we peered into a cardboard box brimming with baby chicks, I knew we had to have them. Well, three of them—even though we were told up front that it was a coin toss as to whether each chick would lay eggs rather than crow (that is, be female). We hedged our bets, put the birds in a box and headed to Lowe’s in search of a bin large enough to house our “girls,” whom we named Sophie, Charlotte and Lucy, for eight to 10 weeks.

In the early days the chicks stayed in the bathtub under a makeshift lid Brandon fashioned out of chicken wire. We attached a heat lamp to a chair to keep them warm and moved it farther from the bathtub each week as they grew bigger and stronger. Meanwhile, I walked on eggshells for fear that one or more of them would kick the bucket.

Every day after school the boys cleaned the bin and made sure the chicks’ food and water were clean—no small feat, considering the fact that the birds tipped over the dispensers daily. After dealing with the mess, and bathed in the soft glow of the heat lamp, our boys sat on the tub ledge for hours holding the girls to

ensure that they’d be friendly as they grew into hens.

Just when I could no longer tolerate the stench, the chicks were big enough to survive the warm California days and the cool spring nights. Brandon spent the better part of a weekend converting our backyard playhouse into a coop, even lining the bottom with chicken wire so the girls would be protected from predators. Our boys were in business—or so we thought.

As weeks turned into months, their enthusiasm waned, and our growing hens began to stink. “Boys, chickens!” I heard myself say on the regular. They were bored with picking up feces daily and cleaning the coop each week, particularly since they had no eggs to show for their efforts. “I have to scoop poop for 10 minutes every single day,” one of my 10-year-olds complained. “And for what? A chicken who smells like gorilla armpit. Every time I try to pick up Lucy, she slaps me with her wings and screams in my face.”

Still, we waited patiently for the girls to start laying. Then, one Saturday, we awoke to *Cock-a-doodle-doo!* Brandon and I sat bolt

upright in bed, stared at each other and prayed that the sound, one made only by male chickens, had wafted in from a distant farm or perhaps a neighbor’s television. Even an auditory hallucination would have been preferable to the unthinkable but unmistakable truth that the testosterone-fueled crowing had come from our own backyard.

We weren’t sure which of the three birds had made the sound, but I was desperate to find out. With each morning wake-up call, I rushed out of bed, down the stairs and out the back door, hoping to catch our cock’s signature cackle. I inched close to the coop and watched like a hawk, but it was impossible to tell which bird had produced it.

One Saturday morning, the answer became clear: A cockfight broke out between Charlie and Lu (previously Charlotte and Lucy), and my husband caught the entire brawl on film. “They’re going at it in the garden,” Brandon said, handing me his phone as evidence. I watched in awe as Charlie puffed up his saddle feathers and charged Lu. The birds hopped at each other like mobsters unwilling to back down from a duel.

So instead of my buying a floppy hat and skipping off to a farmers’ market every weekend, my husband and I began brainstorming ways to off-load two roosters and manage our boys’ devastation. “Doesn’t that mean two new hens?” I asked him. I was sure of only one thing: I did *not* want more baby chicks in my bathtub or another sex-related coin toss. And that was when it hit me: *Maybe this is our out.*

As luck would have it, one of Brandon’s coworkers had a chicken farm, so rehoming our cocks was easier than we’d thought it would be. And if we wanted hens, Brandon’s colleague was willing to deliver them.

“So here’s the deal, guys,” I said to our sons. “Your dad is willing to ask his coworker for two hens in exchange for our two roosters, *but* if you want the chicks, you have to do *all* the work that goes with them.”

They paused for less than a minute, then shook their heads and began brainstorming new business ideas. In the end, we converted our coop into a shed and started a garden instead. ♣

