



WORK FOR IT

Teaching the true value of American Girl swag.

BY AMY SHEARN

In the case that you have never encountered American Girl Place, all you really need to know is that when one purchases one's first hundred-dollar doll, it comes with a Starter Collection. You don't buy a doll, you buy a habit. For my daughter's second birthday, she was given a Bitty Baby, the gateway American Girl drug, er, doll, whom she calls Special Baby, or Spesh for short. Spesh has one lazy eye but accessories to die for. Recently my five-year-old daughter spied in the American Girl catalog (it is easier to rid oneself of bedbugs than it is to unsubscribe from this particular publication) the Bitty Baby Crib. This crib is gorgeous. It is also \$115, or the approximate cost of an actual baby crib. Because we are mean and horrible, my husband and I explained that if she

wanted to save up the money herself, she could. Our daughter is not, I regret to report, gainfully employed. But as five-year-olds go, she is very determined. She agreed to our terms and began gathering up her little brother's toys to sell.

We devoted the next weekend to the Special Baby's Crib Fund Benefit Stoop Sale and Lemonade Stand. We were pretty proud of ourselves. What stellar parenting! My husband and I organized sale items and chalked the neighborhood sidewalk with signs. Our daughter screamed, "LEMONAAAAADE!" at passersby for 20 minutes and then asked if she had enough quarters to stop.

The next day, she reported that her brother was pulling all the underwear out of his dresser drawers but that she would be happy to "babysit" him if I was busy. "Oh, and I charge a dollar an hour," she added. This kid was really learning the value of hard work, I thought proudly. Later, mid-temper tantrum: "I could stop crying and get ready nicely for FIVE DOLLARS." And she was also learning the value of...

extortion! But \$115 is a lot of clams. The project dragged on. Every night she would count out her money and ask why it was taking so long to become the correct amount. We all started getting weary of the eternal teachable moment. Given that my husband and I were knocking ourselves out to help her "save" enough money, were we really doing anything to make her feel less entitled? She never for a moment doubted that she would someday get Spesh's crib. And neither, truth be told, did we.

Then came the fateful day when we estimated she had earned enough and dumped out her treasure chest's worth of coins to be counted. Amazingly, she had \$126.47. We went to the American Girl store, and there was the crib, in a beam of heavenly light, kitted out with a handful of *not-included* princessy accessories.

My daughter studied the display, assimilating the idea that her saved-up kitty paid for only the crib plus tax and not the canopy, monitor, blankets, and extra doll featured. We had been afraid of this. And, as she is somewhat given to high-volume histrionics, we were bracing ourselves. My husband had even drawn up and had her sign a contract, before we had left, that stipulated dire consequences in case of temper fits. So I was shocked and amazed and so proud to see her reaction. Maybe some part of our improvised kitchen-table TED talk on perseverance had actually stuck with her. Or maybe she was really growing up. Because after surveying the crib accessories for a long moment, she shrugged—this child who knows how to get exactly what she wants—and said, "I'll save up for those next. I'm sure I can do it!"

AMY SHEARN is the author of the novel *The Mermaid of Brooklyn*. She lives in Brooklyn.



TEACH CHILDREN
how to express
their appreciation
for a gift with the
note-writing tips
at [realsimple.com/
thankyou](http://realsimple.com/thankyou).