

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Reaching for the Next Rung

“**G**UESS WHAT?” a four-year-old said. “I really wanted to hit someone, but I didn’t. I used my self-control.” I commented on how big he’s getting, my more colloquial way of saying “You’re maturing.” I felt thrilled that he had absorbed an adult’s compliment about achieving self-control and felt proud of his accomplishment. It’s important for us to cultivate children’s desires to grow up, to feel more and more self-sufficient and in control of their impulses.

Oddly, not every child does push for more growth. In the past, there was too much emphasis on children acting like little adults. We now know how important it is not to let children grow up too soon. However, in the rush of everyday life, it’s easy to forget that we need to make “reaching for the next rung on the ladder of life” appealing.

If we perform tasks that children can do for themselves or react with negative attention to tantrums, screaming, or other forms of acting out, it’s easy to nourish their unconscious motivation to remain babyish and attract negative attention.

Do you remember how proud you felt when an adult commented on how grown-up you seemed when you were polite or helpful? We want to nurture that part of the child that feels good about her growth, whether it’s dressing herself or acting appropriately in public. Motivating maturity can be difficult with the second or youngest child in a family who has discovered the niche of being a baby. The key is offering compliments when children attempt to do things for themselves or regulate their own behavior. The idea of becoming more mature has to feel rewarding.

A friend told me how her mother had inspired her toward a leap in development when she was a young child. Her mom hung a beautiful dress in the closet and simply said, “You can wear that when you wear big-girl panties every day.” My friend couldn’t wait to master the art of wearing panties because she wanted to be that big girl. “Look how grown-up you’re acting!” should be one of the compliments that makes any child feel most proud.

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