

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Little Things That Make a Difference

I OVERHEARD GIRLS SINGING a jubilant, made-up song that reflects the positive abilities they can bring to the world. “If you want us to help, help, help, we can do it. We can clean, we can help, help, help.” The song’s finale declared, in operatic style, that the preschool dress-up corner they had been working on so vigorously was “all cleaned up, up, up.” What an accomplishment! These improvised lyrics reveal that at the ages of three or four, these children have already established identities as capable helpers. Research shows that it is the “action of helping” that spurs children to feel motivated to assist in situations in the future. It feels good to do something that makes a difference, especially if someone notices our efforts.

Adults can encourage children to reach out to others as a positive activity by shining a light on the countless opportunities to support others that occur in our daily life. We can talk about “helping” in terms of a broad spectrum of possibilities, not just chores or cleaning. Sometimes being quiet is helping someone who has to concentrate. Activities like drawing a picture for Grandma or playing a game with a younger sibling can show children that little things they do can make a difference. Making people happy or cheering them up when they’re sad is just as helpful as doing chores.

Research also shows that positive discussions about the ways we like to offer service in the world (“I like to bring dinner to people when they’re sick”) make a crucial difference in children’s growing awareness of helpfulness as an important ability to cultivate. A friend who gives workshops for parents and teachers likes to tell the story of a grandfather walking on the beach with his grandson. Each time the man found a starfish washed up on the beach, he threw the creature back so it could stay alive. “But Grandpa,” the boy said, “there are so many starfish that wash up on beaches. How could throwing back the few that you find change things for them?” The grandfather simply picked up another starfish and placed it in the water, saying, “I don’t know about all starfish, but it makes a difference to this little fellow.”

Let’s show all our children that they can make a difference too.

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