

## *Celebrating Self-Sufficiency*

“The essence of independence is to be able to do something for oneself.”

~ *Maria Montessori*

**L**ET’S MAKE THIS SUMMER A CELEBRATION of self-sufficiency—a time to build children’s competencies in the skills of everyday life. Do you ever wish you had acquired particular competencies as a child? I feel lacking in practical skill when I eat spaghetti. Someone forgot to show me how to twirl the noodles on my fork, and now I feel too old to admit my incompetence.

Children often feel that way too. Recently an older preschool boy confided that he had sand in his shoes. I reassured him that it was fine to take the shoes off and empty them in the sandbox. His response was a poignant look of confusion. Then he whispered, “Could you put my shoes back on for me after I get them off?” I praised him for getting them off and on himself (with my help).

There are windows of opportunity when teaching practical tasks aligns seamlessly with a child’s development. At this time of year, when children are making transitions that make them feel more mature, we can easily suggest that they add some practical skills to their repertoire. “Since you’re going to kindergarten, let’s practice washing out your own lunch box.”

A reporter once confronted me by phone about not doing my motherly duty since my children learned to do their own laundry at a young age. Later my children were surprised when college roommates had no idea how to run a washing machine or cook their own food. In the past, adults used to prepare young people for making their way in the world. Now, with so much emphasis on academics, skills that promote feelings of maturity and independence can easily be overlooked. Google “Montessori Practical Life” for concrete ideas on teaching physical skills to children. Meanwhile, here are some ideas for helping your child to develop competencies that will serve him throughout life.

**Handling money.** A Meher Schools parent remembers when her daughter wanted an expensive electronic device in second grade. The seven-year-old saved money for a year to buy it. The girl’s father wanted simply to buy the item for her, but the mom relates, “I want her to learn how to handle money. Recently she wanted a special purse, and she was proud that she could buy it with her own money.” Encourage children to make choices about how they spend their money and to learn from their decisions.

**Preparing food.** The expansive days of summer lend themselves to family cooking projects. Help your child learn to chop vegetables for a salad and make snacks and sandwiches for himself. There are other important lessons we can teach children about food: the ability to eat nicely or make choices from a menu and communicate them to the server. These skills can be nurtured when children are young and eager to learn them.

**Cleaning.** Few people experience the same joy in cleaning as a preschool child. Give your child a scrub brush in a bucket of water on a summer day and ask her to clean the front walk. Teach your child to sort laundry and use the washing machine. Cleaning with children reminds us that the process can be fun. We want children to learn getting dirty isn’t a disaster—messes get made and they can be cleaned up.

Sometimes it's hard for any of us to remember not to do things for a child that she can do herself. For example, it can be faster to carry a child into preschool rather than having her walk. It's easier pick up a child's things rather than getting in a struggle about cleaning up. It revitalizes us to stop and ask ourselves, "How would my child's feelings about herself change if she did this for herself?" "How does a sense of independence affect my child's life?" We are all learning about children's amazing capabilities and our roles in encouraging self-sufficiency.

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