

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Helpfulness Comes Through Practice

“WE’RE NOT HAVING MAIDS clean our house anymore,” a four-year-old girl announced. “I’m old enough to help, and the maids didn’t do a good job cleaning anyway. They didn’t even clean behind the TV!” Her voice reflected an air of capability—even a vision that her help would get her house as clean as it should be. This young child’s image of herself as a person with helping skills is obvious at school, where she helps set up snack and mats for rest time. At lunch if a classmate can’t get the lid off a container, our young helper leaps forward to do it.

In this age when adults often describe children in terms of potential academic or athletic prowess, what delight we feel when children talk about themselves in terms of important qualities like being able to help, wanting to be kind, or being able to cheer someone else. In the not-too-distant past, children were counted on as essential contributors to the home, so they needed to learn skills as soon as they were able.

Young children love to create order and master tasks in the physical world, though we need to break down jobs and teach them step by step. That kind of teaching involves time. But when you show your child how to wash a table or wash his clothes, focus on the enthusiasm of learning the task rather than the ability to perform it perfectly. We want all children to see themselves as helpers—people capable of responding to all kinds of challenges and convinced that they can put a helping hand out whenever it’s needed.

January 25, 2017

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