

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Supporting Children's Self-Sufficiency

A PHOTO OF A BABY HOLDING A SPATULA under running water to help wash dishes made the news this week. The infant probably couldn't get the utensil clean, but he may have experienced an indefinable sense of competence beyond his age and a budding sense of helpfulness. The funny image of a baby participating in what's thought of as an adult activity can offer us profound insight into children's motivation to learn practical skills.

Maria Montessori called acquiring those abilities "Practical Life," and she taught very young children from the Italian slums to care for their classrooms, scrubbing tables, sweeping the floor, and putting objects away with great care. Her emphasis on independence revealed that children love to learn everyday tasks before they appear to be old enough to do them.

That doesn't mean having babies do the dishes, but young children can easily learn to sweep up crumbs, sponge up a spill, set a table, peel a carrot, and much more. Demonstrating tasks like these with clear attention to detail helps children build concentration and confidence in their own abilities.

The irony is that when adults wait until children are "old enough" to perform household tasks like washing the dishes or making their beds, they encounter a lack of interest. The excitement in doing what they see adults doing comes from having to reach beyond their apparent abilities. The child's bed making may be far from perfect, but trying difficult tasks builds the feeling that "I can care for myself."

Learning self-sufficiency at a young age also has long-term benefits. Children who are included in household chores are more apt to feel confident about caring for themselves when they leave home. Many children leaving for college don't know how to do their laundry or cook. They needed to acquire those skills when they were eager to learn them.

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