

ALLOWING CHILDREN THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE – PART II

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In last month's article, we began the conversation about allowing children to have their own experience, and how easy it is to over-help or under-help children as they are learning new skills and learning how to be capable, confident, and independent young people. This time, we'll take some time to address some strategies to allow children to learn from their own experiences in a manner that is safe, encouraging and empowering.

Taking Time for Teaching

Taking time to identify and teach children some of the important tasks that they can do for themselves and for the family is critical in avoiding over and under-helping. If children know how to do something, and you know it, you can feel safe in allowing them to make mistakes.

Taking time for teaching, simply means intentionally carving out time to train or teach children how to do something for themselves or for the family. For younger children this might mean zipping jackets, dressing themselves, or carrying their own things. For elementary aged children, this might mean setting the table, taking out the garbage, vacuuming, cleaning the bathroom, starting their own business (food stands, shoveling snow, etc.). For middle and high school students: applying for a job, driving, grocery shopping, doing their own laundry, etc.

By helping themselves and helping the family, children gain a sense that they are important and needed members of the family. They find that they are capable and significant, and gain confidence in their ability to make a difference. What tasks or skills do you find yourself doing for your child that they can probably do for themselves, if taught?

Work With and Around Children

Did you ever have one of those uh-oh moments where you realize that your children watch you very closely as they are figuring out how to navigate the world? I have, and it's scary to realize how much of an impact we have on our children, and how much they watch and emulate us. However, it should be comforting to know that our children also pick up on our positive traits – persistence, honesty, hard-work, problem-solving, etc. - as well as our bad habits.

In order to learn from our good qualities and to avoid over-helping and under-helping it is important to first work *with* and then *around* children as they learn a new skill. When a child is first learning a new skill or task, working with them gives us the opportunity to provide encouragement, to observe them, and to help them when they really need it and to model persistence, resilience and focus on quality. After a child starts becoming more capable with a newly acquired skill, then working around them (but not with them) give them the confidence that we trust them to work on their own but are there if we are needed.

Allowing Appropriate Struggle

Observation is so important when allowing children to struggle. When we allow children to appropriately struggle so that they can learn from their own mistakes, they build the qualities of independence, resilience and persistence, as long as they are capable of achieving the task. Here are some good guidelines for allowing children to struggle, appropriately:

How to Empower vs. Enable

1. Know yourself: Are you an over-helper or an under-helper. Are you more likely to jump in and “rescue” your child if their struggling? Are you more likely to give them too much room for struggle and allow for discouragement? If so, take care to watch and make adjustments as you practice allowing your child to learn from their mistakes.
2. Trust what you know about your child. What are they capable of? Where are their blind spots or sensitivities? Check in with other adults who have contact with your child – are there things that he/she can do when they're not in your company (in school, sports, camp, scouts, etc.) that they seem to be incapable of at home?
3. Build on strengths and interests. Children will be more apt to work through a difficulty and develop healthy persistence if they are invested in the process. So, if your child loves to work outside, maybe raking leaves is a better chore to learn than scrubbing the bathroom. If they are more interested in art than in soccer, then maybe drawing lessons may give room for more exercising their persistence muscles.
4. Understand that as much as our children are like us, they are not us. They may have different interests, different talents, and they surely have different priorities. Understanding our children's differences from us allows us to adjust our expectations appropriately and to build up and encourage their unique set of talents and interests.
5. Provide encouragement. Avoid praise of the product, and focus in on how the child feels about their progress (not outcome). Ask questions like, “How did you feel about it?”, “What did you learn?”. Use encouraging statements focused on progress and the process like, “You worked really hard today.”, “I noticed that you have been practicing a lot at home.”, “You must feel good about that.”
6. Step back when you know they can do it, even if they ask for help! When you do this give a nod of encouragement, stay close and quiet. When they persevere, provide encouragement like, “Congratulations.”, or “I noticed that you really stuck that out.”
7. Allow them to be responsible for what they do. This can be the greatest encouragement of all. If you know your child is capable, then the encouragement of requiring them to accomplish a task by themselves without help will show your confidence. Statements like, “I understand you are struggling, but I know you are capable, and I am going to ask that you take care of this by yourself.” Can you remember a teacher, parent, coach or boss holding a line like this? How did you feel?