

DEVELOPING SELF-ESTEEM THROUGH MEANINGFUL WORK – PART I

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There has been much written over the last few decades about the importance finding meaning in our lives. Adults are in pursuit of meaning in various ways. They leave important high paying jobs to find occupations that fulfill them internally, they give what's left of their busy schedules to volunteer for schools, churches and non-profit organizations, and they seek to pass on their knowledge and experience to others in an attempt to help. Why this drive? Alfred Adler, one of the fathers of contemporary psychology, would argue that one of man's deepest longings is to find belonging and significance amongst his community; and that the only way to truly find that is to serve others in a meaningful way.

Children need connection with others, especially their family. It is their primary social/emotional goal, and in order to gain that connection they need to know that they have a meaningful and important role in their community/family. Show me a child with a healthy self-esteem, and I'll show you a child who feels like he/she belongs. Show me a child who feels like she belongs, and I'll show you a child who understands that she is capable of making a meaningful contribution to her family and community. Children don't develop self-esteem through praise, rewards and being advocated for. They gain self-esteem through a deep understanding that they are independent, capable and needed. Just like us!

So, how do we create an environment where children get a chance to experience their own capability and importance to their families and communities. Well, it's more difficult now than it was a hundred years ago. We're a wealthier nation, with more technology (easier lives), and less need for children to contribute to the family financially or through their labor. We simply don't need children in a practical or financial sense like we did years ago, when agriculture and family businesses were the norm. We have to work very hard to give children opportunities to work and provide meaning to the family.

First of all, children are incredibly capable. As part of my job, I interview parents during the admissions process for our Montessori School. During the process many parents will comment about how intelligent and capable their child seems. I always reassure them that they are probably right, and that one of the things that they are discovering is how intelligent and capable all children are; and we don't really get a chance to experience that unless we have our own children or work with them every-day. They are amazing. Current brain research is now telling us that infants as young as six months old are actually understand a lot more verbal language than was previously believed. Six months old!

In Montessori schools all over the world, we spend a lot of our time teaching young children how to do practical life activities that many people think are out of reach for a 2 1/2 or 3 year old.

In order to start helping children gain a sense of belonging and significance (self-esteem) by providing them with opportunities to experience their independence, ability to help and capability, let's start by identifying some important "jobs" that children are capable, by age level:

Ages 2.5 to 5

Self-Care

Dressing themselves	Learning to brush their own	Putting on own coat and shoes
Sweeping up after themselves	Putting folded clothes away	Cleaning up toys
Washing their own hands	Combing own hair	Carrying own backpack/bag
Dragging own rolling suitcase	Learning to make bed	Putting clothes in hamper

Helping the Family

Folding rectangular laundry	Learning to do laundry	Washing dishes with dish wand
Clearing the table	Wiping the table after dinner	Feeding the animals
Helping prepare dinner or lunch	Dusting	Carrying light bags of groceries
Sweeping of small areas with small dustpan and wisk-broom	Emptying small garbage pail to larger garbage pail	Watering plants

Ages 6-9

Self-Care

Cleaning own room	Brushing own teeth	Bathing oneself
Making own bed	Putting own clothes away	Folding own clothes
Learning to do own laundry	Learning to pack own bags	Making own lunch
Pouring own cereal, milk, etc. with child sized containers	Buttoning, zipping, shoe-tying	Flossing own teeth

Helping the Family

Taking out the trash	Weeding the garden	Pet care
Shoveling snow	Putting dishes away	Loading dishwasher
Vacuuming and mopping	Feeding the baby	Dusting
Setting the table	Cleaning the bathroom (yes, the whole thing!)	Making a salad, eggs, simple recipes

Ages 9-12+

Self-Care

Doing own laundry	Keeping own room clean	Ownership of schoolwork
Waking up with alarm clock	Making own lunch	Entrepreneurial endeavors
Buying own school clothes within a budget	Cleaning all of own messes	Budgeting and saving

Helping the Family

Mowing the lawn	Can clean anything!	Gardening, weeding, etc.
All pet care	Landscaping	Cooking
Baking	Vacation research	Baby/sibling sitting
Power washing	Helping grocery shop	Washing dishes

