

MEANINGFUL WORK – PART II

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In last month's article we discussed the importance of empowering children to become contributing members of our homes by helping them to discover how capable they are through meaningful work. We also discussed some age-appropriate "jobs" that children can do around the house. This month I'd like to take some time to discuss some principles that are important in helping to empower children to gain belonging and significance through their contribution to the family.

Taking Time for Training

Taking time to help children learn how to do tasks is critical to empowering them to be independent. Often times we either do things for children that they can do for themselves or we "delegate" it to them without any real training and become critical later on. Neither of these two approaches works well to develop a healthy sense of self in children. Instead, if we take time to break down tasks into small concrete steps and give clear expectations on how to do it children are generally quick studies and are eager to learn to do it themselves.

In teaching children "how to" do a task, consider the following:

- Be sure that you can accept imperfection in the result (if not, you may want to choose a different job for them to do).
- Never finish or correct the job for the child. Let their best work be their best work.
- Break the task down into a few concrete and understandable steps. Think this out before hand, especially if the child is under 5 years old (children this age need simple and concrete examples and are very literal).
- After the lesson, work with your child.
- After he/she begins to become more competent with the task work near your child in case he/she needs help.
- When they are competent with the task allow them independence.
- If a task needs "inspection" create a checklist that your child can use to check their own work vs. being critiqued by the adult. If follow-through by the adult is needed then use questioning vs. telling in evaluating the results (ages 6+).
- For children under 5, and the task is not being done thoroughly, consider giving another lesson at another time vs. correcting it on the spot.
- Allow for struggle – it's OK. Take away the struggle and you take away the victory!

Involve Children in Chore/Task Choosing

One of the best ways to encourage "buy-in" for chores is to allow children some choice in what chores they want to do. Of course, there are always going to be things we have to do that we don't want to do that are on our chore list, but involving children in the creation of chore charts and routines can reduce power struggles a lot when the newly taught tasks lose the luster that comes with a new responsibility and then require self-discipline.

Mix It Up

Allow for change in routines and chores over time. While there are certainly things that children will always have to do for themselves for self-care (making bed, brushing teeth, cleaning room, etc.), chores and work for

the family can be rotated between family members to keep things “fresh” and allow for newly learned skills.

Know Your Limitations – It’s Progress not Perfection

If it is really important to you that your grass have perfectly straight mower lines, and that the trimming is done ever-so carefully, this is probably not a task that you want to delegate to your 12-year old. We all have our pet peeves, and most of them are silly to others, but not to us! So, whether our expectations are rational or not, it’s important that we know what tasks we can let go of and what tasks we can’t!

Progress not Perfection

Allow for mistakes – they’re the best way to learn! Over time children will get better and better at taking care of themselves and helping the family. They need the space to grow, get better at what they’re doing, and trust in that they want to do their best. While it’s really important to follow-through and help children learn the value of a completed task, it’s also vital to avoid discouragement. It can be really discouraging to have done your best work as a child and then hear that it wasn’t good enough. Good generalship is called for in discerning between a half-effort and a child’s best work. Consider focusing on the child’s efforts and giving honest encouragement on the process vs. focusing solely on the results.

Consistency and Follow-Through

Much of what we have discussed up to this point is focused on teaching and encouraging children to find their capabilities and facilitate an environment where they can help in meaningful ways. However, as children become more capable and the newness of a responsibility wears off (and the need for self-discipline kicks in) children will always need follow-through by adults. This is not only important to help build self-discipline, but it also says to our children that we do need their help and that they are important and needed members of our family, and as such there are expectations.

Here are some effective ways to reduce power-struggles and increase cooperation when creating an environment of responsibility and accountability:

- Let routine be the boss – establish few and consistent routines that are predictable. If Saturday morning is room cleaning time, then that’s what we do on Saturday mornings! Be careful not to over or under routinize your schedule, as both lead to inconsistency!
- Work together – if routines are set up for house cleaning, room cleaning, outside work, etc., and everyone does their work at the same time then children feel a sense of belonging to the bigger unit and don’t feel as though they’re being singled out.
- Involve children in the planning of routines.
- Mix it up (above).
- Use few words when following up and avoid lectures.

Remember the Goal

The purpose of preparing an environment where children have the opportunity to contribute to their family through meaningful work is not simply to instill skills and responsibility, but to develop a strong sense of self-worth and social interest. There has been much written in the last few decades about the need for “intrinsic value” or being accepted just as we are, and this is vital to a strong sense of self-worth. We also need a strong sense of instrumental value that comes from making a contribution to others and service and culminates in mutual respect.