

Let Me Help:

Supporting the Young Child at Home

By Karin Salzmann. Reprinted from *Montessori Talks to Parents*, NAMTA; with permission from NAMTA and the author.

In primitive societies, and even in quite recent times, children always participated in the life of the home. A sense of belonging, along with pride of accomplishment, help the child to grow up strong and secure.

When we begin to draw the child into family chores, there are, of course, difficulties. But taking time to show a child how to help is actually easier in the long run than trying to keep her occupied and out of the way. Because she will keep insisting, she will forever turn up underfoot. What she is saying is, "Let me help, let me be part of your life!" Or she will pull away: "I want to do it myself!"

Most four-year-old girls and boys are capable of driving a nail very well. Fives can scramble eggs, iron clothes. Real jobs begin around two. Obviously, many tasks are too overwhelming. It's hard to know where to begin to "clean your room;" but "let's dust this shelf" is quite manageable. Little ones enjoy washing a few tiles on the kitchen floor, wiping fingerprints from woodwork, or dusting.

Planning ahead what your child can do to help, and how to involve her, is something like planning a party or a trip; it's fun and well worth the effort. Montessori teachers practice lessons by themselves before giving them, to be sure there are no snags. If there is anything especially difficult in the procedure (such as unscrewing a lid or turning on a tap), show this first, separately, in a preparatory lesson.

Have everything it takes to complete the task at-hand, together in a convenient place before beginning to show it. This helps the child to concentrate on the task. He also feels more secure if things are in order and have a place. His tools should be scaled to his size if possible: a dust cloth about six inches square, a little scrub brush about four inches long, for example.

It's best to be at the child's level, where he can easily see what you're doing. Show him with clear, slow, economical movement, talking only if it is really necessary (he's going to copy your movements, so that's what to focus his attention on; chatter is distracting).

It's wise not to show anything you don't want him to copy. If you want to show how to mop up spills, wait until a spill occurs. If you pour water on the table to show him how to mop it up, he'll assume, quite naturally, that pouring onto tables is okay.

After you've shown him how to do something, invite him to try. Stay with him, but don't interfere or criticize or correct him. Show him again, then or later (whichever seems most tactful), making a positive new challenge out of one problem ("now let's see if we can keep all the water in the sink, not a drop on the floor"). Let him work at his own pace for as long or as short a time as he wishes.

When he is finished (not before—that's interrupting!), delight in the effects of the child's work, rather than praising the child directly. "How nice and shiny you've made it!" means much more to him than "what a good boy you are!" Maybe your goal was to have a good boy, but his goal was to make something shine; knowing he succeeded builds his self-confidence.

Now you can show him how to put away. It is very important that he understands this is part of the job. Be positive and help him as much as necessary to keep up his participation until everything is back in its place. If you think he needs it, re-present the same thing again another day. Never give help where it is not needed, but be around, if only for the warmth of your presence.

