

“Help Me Do It Myself”

The child’s natural urge is toward independence. “Help me to do it myself.” And in acquiring independence and new abilities the child grows in self confidence and dignity. Dignity comes with the ability to care for oneself, give help to others and care for the environment. Self confidence, deep solid true self esteem, comes from the child’s own efforts and achievements. A feeling of self confidence is an essential factor in a person’s ability to reach and learn. The greatest help we can give a child is the real opportunity to grow in independence and to experience feelings of accomplishment – “I can do it!”

The Practical Life activities in the Montessori classroom are truly formative and help the child grow in self confidence and dignity. The Practical Life activities are the simple activities that we do every day in caring for ourselves and our home, and the social graces and courtesies we extend in maintaining harmonious social relations. Such activities as dressing, preparing food, washing dishes, sweeping, polishing, sewing, gardening, using tools and social courtesies such as “Please, thank you, excuse me...”

They are the simple everyday activities which the young child sees in his home and to which the child is naturally drawn in his need to adapt and belong. They are familiar and give security when a child first enters a Montessori class. The children are given real opportunities to care for themselves, one another and their environment. These Practical Life activities develop independence, true self esteem, coordination and control of movement, concentration and orderly habits of work. They develop responsibility towards oneself, others, and the environment.

Encouraging your child to also participate in the life of the home gives your child a sense of belonging, a sense of accomplishment, and helps the child grow to be a responsible, independent, secure, caring person.

Your child can help with many Practical Life activities in the home such as sweeping, dusting, raking leaves, arranging flowers, sorting laundry into light and dark clothes, helping to clear the dinner table and wiping the table after eating, feeding and brushing pets, watering plants, helping to prepare the salad, and so on.

In setting up these Practical Life activities in the home try to use real materials rather than toys. These materials should be child size, beautiful, and available to the child. For example, cut a sponge in half to fit a small hand and place it on a lovely soap dish so that your child can clean the sink or bathtub when he wants to.

Arrange your home in a way that your child can manage easily, taking into consideration your child’s size. Try to remove obstacles to your child’s emerging independence.

In The Child’s Room or in the Family Room

- Low shelf for activities with just enough activities that each has its own special place. The activities can be rotated from time to time

- A small stable but lightweight table and chair and a cotton mat (special places to do one's activity)
- Low pegs or rods so that the child can put away his own clothes and get them easily to dress himself. Provide manageable clothing.
- Low hanging pictures
- Simple sheets and light comforter so the bed can be made easily
- Full length mirror

In the Kitchen

- A step stool to reach the sink
- A cabinet shelf at the child's level with the child's plates, mugs, etc.
- A small pitcher of water, milk, or juice at the child's level in the refrigerator for all those requests – "I want a drink."
- Provide food like celery and carrot sticks, apples, raisins, cheese in zipper lock bags or easy to open containers on a lower shelf in the refrigerator so the child can get their own snack.
- Child size sponge at the sink.
- Child size mop, broom, dustpan and apron on low hooks.

In the Bathroom

- A stool to reach the sink.
- A lowered towel rack with the child's towel and washcloth.
- A low drawer for the child's brush and comb.
- The child's toothbrush, toothpaste, nailbrush and small soap within easy reach.

Try to be encouraging of your child's efforts towards independence. Even though it may be tempting or expedient to interfere and to do something for your child, it is so important to wait that extra moment to allow the child to do it. If possible, plan ahead so that you give your child the time to put on their shoes, button their coat, or pull up their zipper before you go. This shows a great respect for the child's pace or rhythm.

As soon as the child is able to do a task (i.e. buttoning a coat) the adult who keeps doing it for the child becomes an obstacle to the child's development. This of course, does not mean that we stop observing and helping when the child has a true difficulty. Outwardly, the adult is passive, but inwardly, observant and active, seeing what the difficulty may be and being available to help when it is really needed.

We must try to remember to encourage independence so that the child may experience that sense of joy, that delight, that sense of accomplishment that comes from "I did it!"

- Susan Brigham, Primary Class Directress