

Developing through Work

What activity will let you:

- get to know your preschooler's interests
- improve his or her self-esteem
- practise language skills
- teach colours and concepts like "same/different"
- demonstrate organizational routines
- transmit values of cooperation and mutual help
- build family connections
- all while you're making a dent in your household chores?

How about folding laundry with your three year old? You can take advantage of this ordinary task, as well as many other similar daily activities, to enhance various aspects of your child's development.

Feeling important and capable

Time spent working together can be time spent getting to know one another. Your child will feel important when you take time to listen and talk about what interests him while you accomplish something side by side. At the same time, he can be proud of the contribution he's making to the family's well-being. We all feel good about ourselves when we know that we have made a positive difference in the lives of people we care for. Children are no different, and parents can start to give them opportunities to help when they're very young.

Begin early

As early as 15 or 16 months, children want to imitate what they see adults and older children doing. They want to sweep the floor, wipe the fridge and wash the dishes. Now is the time to get them involved by giving them a small broom and a cloth and letting them work alongside you. As you work, describe what you're doing and why. Break tasks into small steps and give them one or two steps that they can do, so that they can develop their skills gradually. A two year old can hold a dustpan, for instance, but you will probably have to help guide the dust into the garbage can. A five year old, with better balance, strength and coordination, can take on more of the job herself, while you stay nearby to supervise.

Give meaningful work

The work you ask children to do has to be real, if children are to feel that their contribution is truly needed and important. Meaningful tasks were easy to find in the days when children fed the chickens, brought in wood for the stove, or darned holes in socks, but in a modern apartment, what can children do?

Here are some ideas for jobs for young children:

- help prepare food - tear lettuce for salad, arrange celery and carrot sticks on a plate
- help make a grocery list - how many potatoes are left? do we need peanut butter?
- help put away purchases - cans in the cupboard, oranges in the refrigerator
- run errands - get a diaper for the baby, tell daddy the phone is for him
- amuse younger siblings - sing a song to the baby in the car, look at a book with a toddler
- set and clear the table - place the silverware, bring the cups, put plates in the dishwasher
- help with laundry - put dirty clothes in a hamper, take clean clothes to the room where they belong

Show your appreciation

After the job is done, let children know that you noticed and that their contribution makes a difference to you: "Thank you for clearing the table. There's so much to do and your help really counts." For older children, imitating adults is no longer a thrill and making a school lunch is no longer a challenge. You can keep them motivated by focussing on the difference their contribution makes. "Thanks to your help, we cleaned up the kitchen really quickly. I'll have time later to take you over to your friend's house."

Keep expectations realistic

It's important to be realistic about what your young child can actually do, especially about what it's safe for them to do. You won't be asking your toddler to carry your cup of hot coffee, but if you trust her to bring your water bottle, you'll give her a chance to feel proud. Expect that it will take children a lot of practice before they can do a task well. Praise their effort and forget any perfectionist standards.

Have patience

At first, finding ways for children to "help" will probably actually take longer than doing things yourself. But maximum efficiency is a goal for the workplace, not for parenting. If you're having trouble being patient while children are learning, remember all the other things that are happening at the same time: building confidence, strengthening relationships, learning words and concepts, expressing values and attitudes. Encourage yourself by thinking of the day that they'll be able to take over these tasks completely, when they really will lighten your load and you'll be a family that works together.

by Betsy Mann