

# Understanding Montessori



## Help Me Help Myself

October 4, 2009

Children from about age three are asking us to help them learn independence. Children want to learn how to do things on their own without adult supervision or permission. Even though at times we feel we have to help children constantly, in reality, children are asking us to help them help themselves.

Much of what we classify as "misbehavior" in the three to six-year-old, upon closer inspection, is children trying to do things by themselves, and not being successful. In our hurried world, it's easier to do it ourselves than to stop and show our children how to do a task, and patiently wait as they complete it. Do we really have 15 minutes every morning for our three-year-old to put on her shoes and socks?

Visiting friends a few years ago, I asked their nine-year-old if he'd like to help me cut apples for a pie. Jimmy's eyes widened. "Oh, no, I can't. Mom won't let me use a knife."

"Why is that? Were you irresponsible with a knife?"

"No. Mom's afraid I'll cut myself."

After getting an okay with Jimmy's mom, I began showing him how to cut the apples into chunks after I'd peeled and quartered them. Within half an hour, Jimmy had learned how to peel, quarter and cube apples. And not a mangled finger in sight. At dinner Jimmy was so proud of "our" pies. He thanked me for taking the time to show him how to use a paring knife. "I knew I could do it if someone just let me." Help me help myself.

We can begin to show our children how to use serious tools such as knives, scissors, hammers, and screwdrivers around age three, with 100 percent adult supervision. First, we need to feel confident that the child will listen and follow our direction. If not, he or she is not ready for these kinds of tasks.

Secondly, we need to find tools that are safe. For helping in the kitchen a small butter knife or canapé knife will cut bananas and apple slices, but won't cut small fingers. There are scissors available that will only cut paper, and not hair or clothes. Small hammers can be used to drive 16 penny-nails into a log end. For hammering, invest in a pair of child sized safety goggles. A short three-inch screwdriver and ratchet can be used to loosen and tighten screws and bolts on boards.

As a child's level of skill and responsibility grow, we can introduce new levels of difficulty with different tools and materials.

Giving our children "real" work with real tools will help them gain independence. Self-esteem is based on having skills, meaning you can act in ways that benefit yourself and others. Too often, adults think that just telling someone that they are wonderful develops a feeling of self worth. Self-esteem is based on the self-confidence of knowing how to do something, not on what someone says to you.

"Help me help myself" is the young child's cry for independence that leads to true confidence and self-esteem. Don't do for your child what they can do for themselves.

Remember, any unnecessary help is an obstacle to a person's independence.

**Next week:** Increasing Your Child's Active Working Memory