

Teaching Young Children Through Work and Play

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We have learned so much recently about the importance of play for young children that many families may overlook how meaningful work can also nurture development. Young children flourish when allowed to enter the world of real work that surrounds them, from picking up toys or feeding the cat to grating carrots for salad. In the company of family or other adults, children eagerly engage in work. They want to "help" with the pursuits of adults, and this work can be a crucial part of their early learning. If you shield young children from a whole category of activity simply because it is called "work" and not "play," you may be limiting their developmental opportunities. On the other hand, if you invite children to participate in work and play, you give them many more ways to grow and learn. Through work that is meaningful and a real contribution to the family or group, even young children can gain a sense of purpose, and come to feel more a part of the family. With proper adult supervision, there are many types of chores that families can consider for young children that can help them begin learning about responsibility, independence and caring for themselves. Here are a few examples:

- Gathering, preparing, and cooking food: Even when they are too young to help with a meal, children can play a role in preparing snacks. And by taking your children to the grocery or market, you can help them better understand where food comes from and how we buy it.
- Running errands: When you need something, ask one of your children to help. Letting young children run errands conveys your feelings of trust in them.
- Caring for younger children: Simple tasks (like reading or singing to younger siblings) help older children learn about responsibility and sharing.
- Housekeeping: Children can help set the table, serve themselves at meals, and even run the vacuum.
- Caring for younger children: Simple tasks (like reading or singing to younger siblings) help older children learn about responsibility and sharing.
- Caring for animals: Pets and livestock require water, food and clean environments. Young children can learn valuable lessons by caring for animals.
- Gardening: Nurturing plants helps children learn about the wonders of nature. If you don't have space for a garden, a small window planter can bring opportunities to explore.

In all of these activities, it's important to remember several points:

1. Keep in mind what your children can accomplish, and how much you need to supervise to make sure the activity is safe.
2. Even young children can tell the difference between busy work and real work.
3. Remember that many chores actually take longer with the help of young children, but a little patience and a few extra minutes lets them reap real benefits from assisting the family.

By matching your expectations to their abilities, encouraging and approving their efforts, and allowing plenty of time for the performance of each task, you can give your young children many opportunities to learn and grow through work.

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