Parenting Exchange
Self Help #1 Library

by Karen Stephens

Self Help Skills and Chores Build Children's Identity and Confidence

At birth each of us is completely dependent on others. Childhood is then an apprenticeship that gradually prepares us to handle adulthood — its freedoms, pleasures, and responsibilities. From infancy, children naturally reach out to the world; beginning with mom and dad. As that attachment is cemented, children seek more achievements and competence.

By the time kids are age two, controlling their body, making it do what they want it to, and getting what they want are major goals. Gradually they practice skills to help them reach those goals, such as walking and talking.

Pride in achievement and desire to please parents motivate children's self-help skills. When a child beams, "Look what I can do!" he is carving out a personal identity. He is also learning to be a cooperative, able member of the family and community.

Sometimes parents have mixed feelings about children's flowering abilities. On one hand, we applaud their determination to spread their wings. On the other, we cling to the closeness dependence offers. But encouraging developmentally appropriate self-help skills helps children in the long run. They become more self-assured, accountable, and responsible as they forge toward adulthood.

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There's no magic to teaching children self-help skills. It's most often a matter of patience and following a child's lead. A two year old's chant is often, "Me do it!" And so you begin.

Take your child's age and abilities into account as you allow your child greater independence. If your expectations are unrealistic, you could set children up for failure and frustration by expecting too much or too little. Parenting books, relatives, other parents, child care professionals, and teachers can help you determine readiness for particular skills.

As children approach self-help skills, it's guaranteed they'll do things differently, and messier than you. But as children gain finesse through trial and error, they'll achieve mastery and build pride. Meanwhile, your patience and gentle guidance will mean a lot.

Consistently coach children toward mastery, guiding with small, manageable steps. Encourage by giving positive and specific feedback. Show appreciation for individual effort, concentration, and attention to detail. Resist being overly critical of self-help attempts. Early negative responses squelch kids' initiative. With time, children will become more coordinated. And they'll be more observant as they gradually learn to meet accepted standards.

I'll give you an example. Let's say your child is three. You've noticed he tags along by your side as you make beds. So you capitalize on the *teachable* moment by showing him how to help out by pulling up sheets and blankets and placing pillows at the bed head. As he helps, "ohhh" and "ahhh" at each step he completes; but don't go overboard. Children can spot fake praise quickly.

In his beginning, Junior's self-made bed will have a few (okay, a lot) of wrinkles. The pillows will be askew, and they probably won't be fluffed to their plumpest perfection. Here's what you do: Overlook it! And don't remake the bed in front of Junior. If you absolutely MUST smooth the sheets, wait until Junior's around the corner and can't see he didn't do the job as good as you.

Other steps toward self-help begin with basic daily routines. Children can use utensils to feed themselves. Moving from a high-chair to a booster chair supports independence. Except on marathon shopping days when strollers are a blessing, children over age two years can walk on their own most of the time.

Simple self-help skills for children include attending to their own cleanliness, grooming, clothing, and toys. Following is a list of self-help skills children ages two years and older can typically handle, regardless of gender. After that, I list household chores most children age four and older can carry out. By including children in these activities, children will learn to contribute to the family, and to care for themselves and their personal belongings. It's standard curriculum in an apprenticeship for adulthood.

Self-Help Skills for Children

- Wash hands before eating, after toileting and playing outside
- Use toilet as development allows, including flushing and wiping
- Cover mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue
- Use grooming supplies, such as a toothbrush and comb, help bathe self
- Eat independently, using utensils and cup as abilities allow
- Clean up own spills and messes with paper towel, sponge or child-sized broom
- Put own garbage into trash container
- Help make bed
- Choose clothes from two choices; dress self, at least partially
- Put dirty clothes in laundry basket, clean ones in drawers or on low hooks
- Get personal toys and books from child-height shelves
- Play with toys, such as puzzles and blocks and put away after play
- Keep track of favorite blanket or stuffed animal
- Help with simple toy repair, like taping torn pages in a book
- Cooperate getting into safety seat or belt
- Cooperate with medical care, like taking temperature
- Help put items in child care cubby

Home Chore Options for Children Age Four and Up

- **Morning preparation**: help with tasks such as loading child care/school backpack items or clearing breakfast dishes
- **Evening preparation**: put on pajamas, lay out clothes for morning, help make sack lunches, turn off TV
- **Meals**: help set table, help with simple food preparation like cleaning celery, say blessing, clear dishes, help unload dishwasher
- **Household cleaning**: dust, shake rugs, help water plants, rinse bathtub with water, wipe down counter top, put bath mats in hamper
- **Garage care**: sort recyclables, sweep garage, dust car interior and wash outside with sponge and water
- **Pet care**: feed, water, groom, exercise, put clean litter in cat box, help calm pets at vet visits
- **Yard care**: rake leaves, sweep walk, fill birdbaths with hose, shovel snow
- **Clothing care**: collect dirty laundry, sort and fold dry laundry, deliver laundry, clean and organize shoes
- **Errands**: get mail or newspaper, help make shopping list, help grocery shop, carry light bags
- **Gardening**: hoe, plant, water, weed, harvest, clean fruits and vegetables
- **Celebrations**: make gifts or gift wrap, decorate, write invitations and thank-yous, help plan and prepare snacks, clean up after party

Parenting Books

Child development books by Louise Bates Ames and her colleagues at the Gesell Institute of Human Development can be found at Institute's web site: www.gesellinstitute.org. They offer nine separate books that cover child development for each year, spanning ages 1 to 9. Development for ages 10-14 years is combined together in one book.

For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at www.ChildCareExchange.com.

■ ***Health and Safety*** • *Teach fire safety during the preschool years*

■ ***Language*** • *Home Routines Can Build Kids' Literacy Skills*

■ ***Power of Play*** • *There's More to Children's Block Play than Meets the Eye*

■ ***Nature Connections*** • *Children Reap a Bushel of Benefits from Outdoor Gardening*

• *Gardening with Children: Green Thumbs Can Grow Indoors, Too*

— Additional resources available in Article Archives at www.ChildCareExchange —

• *From a Parent's Perspective — Cooperation Reigns* by Roslyn Duffy

• *How Young Children Build Images of Themselves* by Francis Wardle

• *Image-Building — A Hands-On Developmental Process* by Janet Brown McCracken

• *Not in Praise of Praise* by Kathleen Grey

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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