

Emptying the Dishwasher Can Enrich Kids' Mental Health

Guiding children toward mastery of new skills can help them thrive — and get some household chores done at the same time.



Credit...Jack Taylor

By Sharon Holbrook

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I begged my 12-year-old to help me with the pandemic task of learning to dye my hair at home. I could have done it myself, but I've learned that small opportunities to feel useful and successful are good for kids' mental health, which I'm especially attuned to in our current circumstances.

Among the other ideas I've tried during these long months: Letting my kids practice phone skills by having them call to order takeout and asking them for help with setting up the Wi-Fi booster. In some cases, it would be faster to just do these things without their "help," but I'm doing it deliberately, to benefit my kids.

It might seem like a strange time to ask parents to take a new approach — don't we have enough to juggle? But focusing on helping our kids develop what psychologists call "self-efficacy," or a person's belief that they are capable of successfully meeting the tasks or challenges that face them, can yield immediate benefits.

But can such small tasks really instill a sense of control right now, in a pandemic? It's possible, experts say, and allowing kids to try to meet real-life challenges is the best way for them to build that [healthy self-efficacy](#). Albert Bandura, the Stanford University psychologist who first [developed the concept of self-efficacy](#) in the 1970s, called these important first-person accomplishments “mastery experiences.”

Lea Waters, professor of positive psychology at the University of Melbourne, Australia, said self-efficacy “is a primal part of the formula of good mental health, because without that sense of efficacy, without that belief that I can get things done, you can really easily see how a young person or even an adult would not only lose their confidence, but lose their motivation to move forward.” Humans thrive on a sense of control and capability; low self-efficacy, or learned helplessness, is associated with [anxiety, depression, lack of hope](#) and lack of motivation, she said, while higher self-efficacy is associated with [life satisfaction](#), self-confidence, social connection and [growth mind-set](#).

Mastery experiences don't have to be grand accomplishments. Dr. Waters pointed to things as small as kids completing “a Lego build that was a little bit hard,” packing their own backpacks or walking the dog by themselves.

She suggests that parents become detectives who notice a child's successes and narrate them. This purposeful shift toward noticing and acknowledging small wins helps parents take a positive approach while it also helps kids internalize a sense of their growing abilities.

“We can spot those things and acknowledge, ‘You did that really well; you did that all by yourself,’ or ‘You didn't need as much help from me this time around,’” she said. These successes build up what she called a “bank account” of feelings of efficacy for children that they can draw on the next time they face a challenge, when parents can remind the child, “You know, last time you felt that way, and then you ended up being able to do it all by yourself.”

Of course, you don't want to pile on more responsibilities than a child can handle. Parents should always be attentive to children's health, ensuring that they don't see signs of mental health issues that warrant professional support, said the child and adolescent psychotherapist Katie Hurley, author of “The Happy Kid Handbook.”

“Every kid is different,” said Ms. Hurley. “Take a deep breath and say, ‘What is my kid like without a pandemic?’” Watch for concerning changes in sleep; eating significantly less or more; new anxious behaviors such as constant reassurance-seeking or clinginess; a significant loss of focus; and less interest in connecting with friends, even in favorite ways like social media or video games, she said. “Trust that when you feel that in your gut that something isn't right, then it's probably a good idea to get help.”

Apart from monitoring health concerns, the impulse to “help” our kids by doing more for them is sometimes more about us than it is about our kids, said Ned Johnson, co-author of “The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives.”

[Research has shown](#) that when parents jump in to help kids with a frustrating problem, that intervention can lower parent anxiety while leaving the child's anxiety elevated, Mr. Johnson said. That's because the anxious parent gains a sense of control from taking action rather than remaining helpless on the sidelines, but the child is still left feeling ineffectual and stressed.

It can be hard for parents to let children do more, and perhaps mess up, when a parent could do a task more quickly and effectively. But the pandemic has lowered the stakes in some common family situations. For example, when kids are doing remote learning and don't have to catch the bus, they can take on responsibility for waking themselves up. If the child oversleeps, the parents aren't stuck playing chauffeur; only the child will experience the natural consequences of lateness, Mr. Johnson said, making it easier for parents to let go of some control.

With everyone spending more time at home, families can share tasks more readily, too, even if they're not done perfectly. A preschooler with a broom may not necessarily be cleaning the floor well, but the child feels that efficacy-building sense of accomplishment and helpfulness when they are encouraged to try it for themselves, Mr. Johnson said, and "the experience of coping increases."

If this all sounds like too much work in a pandemic, remember that parents who encourage their children's strengths and self-efficacy not only help their kids, but also themselves. "Parents are really depleted," Dr. Waters acknowledged, but a positive, proactive approach is "kind of a win-win. It's good for your kids," and seeing children thrive is "good for us as parents as well," she said. And her research has found that using a strengths-building approach — finding areas where your kids can take on more responsibility — is also correlated with an increase in parental self-efficacy, a sense that "you are doing the right thing as a parent."

Courtney E. Ackerman, author of several positive psychology books, also counsels parents not to wait until the present crisis is over to instill more self-efficacy in children. Yes, working on developing resilience in these unpredictable times may feel like shoveling while the snow is still falling, she said, but that's OK. "I think it's always snowing," she said. "It's a specifically difficult time now with the pandemic, but life is full of ups and downs."

Now is an excellent time, perhaps better than any other, she said, to work on building a sense of self-efficacy in kids. And if that means parents aren't the only ones endlessly loading and unloading the dishwasher, so much the better.

*[Sharon Holbrook](#), the managing editor of *Your Teen* magazine, is writing a book about how to raise capable kids.*