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Dear Parents of Young Children – Helping or Forcing?
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Dear Parents of young children

Helping or Forcing?

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

SOMETIMES OUR LOVE for our children causes us to be over-anxious to the point that we may try to hasten their progress.

Forcing children to do things before they are ready (physically, mentally, socially, or emotionally) may actually slow them in learning.

There is a "right time" when a child is ready for an experience. This has been called the "teachable moment," in which learning takes place most easily.

Let's look at some typical situations and try to discover the "right moment" and ways in which our help will be the most useful.

Toilet Training

When might we logically begin taking the baby to the toilet? (Here we will discuss only urination.) The answer will depend on what you hope to accomplish. Do you really want to teach the child to use the toilet and at the right time or is your aim simply to cut down on wet diapers?

If you want the child to learn the routine of going to the toilet, then it seems reasonable to expect to wait until the child has reached the right time to begin this learning.

There are some clues that will help us decide whether he is ready. Is he interested in the experience? Is he somewhat cooperative in your efforts? Can his bladder hold urine for a long enough period to make the time that you spend in this direction worthwhile?

At around 15 or 16 months, a mother may notice that her child is dry after a 2-hour period. Some parents like to begin to take a child to the toilet when they find him dry after a 2-hour nap. Taking the child

to the toilet every 1 or 2 hours means that the parent is assuming all the responsibility at this point.

As the child grows, the bladder function matures; mentally, he is growing and learning from adults how to use the toilet. His posture is improving and his language is developing so that he comes to learn words for telling his mother that he wants to be taken to the toilet.

Often, at first, a baby gives this sign after he is wet instead of before. This is an indication that he is progressing in his learning. It may still be a little time before he can make the connection between the feeling of a full bladder, telling his mother, and telling her in time to get him to the toilet. This is not a simple matter of learning—it is quite complex.

If children have not been forced into a rigid routine of training, many of them will be quite cooperative about the process by the end of the second year. This is especially true if parents have praised the child when he is successful without overdoing praise. Accidents must be expected well into the second year and maybe even into the third. Reminders will be necessary for some time.

"Easy Does It"

Many of today's parents have now had the experience of waiting for the child to do most of the training himself (for most children this occurs around the end of the second year). If you are one of these parents who waited, you would probably say that it was accomplished in much less time and with less strain and scolding than trying to train earlier.

This does not mean that parents must sit back and do nothing until the child takes over. You will want to suggest the idea to him occasionally by way of preparing him for the change in his routine. But keep in mind that "easy does it."

Toilet training is more easily accomplished in a warm, friendly atmosphere. Wait for the right time, allow for accidents, and allow for differences in children as to when they are ready.

Learning to Talk

Learning to talk is another case where children can be helped. They may be hindered if, for example, we are too concerned with grammatical errors or the fact that they do not speak plainly. Especially with a 2½-year-old it is more important that he feels free to talk and that you listen to him when he does talk than that you correct him.

In the early pre-school years, constant correcting of children's use of words can cause hesitancy in speech. Just stop to think that if in addition to correcting speech parents are at the same time correcting table manners and concentrating on toilet training, it may add up to just too much correcting. This is in a sense forcing a child.

Rather than correcting the speech of little children, there are ways that we can help them talk better. If parents speak slowly and distinctly and use simple sentences, the child can more easily grasp meanings and come to feel comfortable with words. Using words that are within a child's understanding will also increase his ability to use them.

Interrupting a child in the middle of a sentence may cause him to hesitate, especially if he is struggling for the right word. Ignoring a child who is earnestly trying to tell you something may affect his willingness to try. Hurry in the home is confusing to a little child and does not encourage a free flow of words. Sometimes we urge children to "tell Aunt Hannah how much you like the doll she sent you," or "let Mrs. Brown hear you say the poem you learned this morning." Forcing or strongly urging children to exhibit their talking may meet with real resistance. Children may rebel or they may say what you expect them to say but with difficulty. If the experience is too unpleasant, they may develop a negative attitude about speaking in front of people.

About the time children near school-age, parents are likely to make an extra effort to correct faulty speech. Pressure on a child to improve his speech seldom has the desired effect. With a child of this age, it is better to take him into your confidence and gain his interest in improving.

Certain word and musical games have been found useful in improving the way he says words and in improving rhythm and fluency in speech. Again, good models of speech are thought to be the most valuable help that parents can provide; the child is more apt to repeat what he hears and gradually to correct himself.

While children need good models of speech, they also must have a chance to practice speech. This means that if parents talk all the time or talk for the child, the child will have little chance to practice.

Children are helped in learning to use words through hearing stories read and through listening to records. "Teddy Bear's Picnic" is one record which delights little children with its tune, words, and story.

New Experiences

Usually if a child is helped—not forced—into a new experience, he is

more apt to enter into it willingly and eagerly. Take any simple play experience such as going down a slide for the first time. If a child is urged to try the slide or if he goes unwillingly with an older person, he may become tense and frightened.

Some children require more preparing ahead than others. One way of preparing a child for this experience would be first to look at a picture of a slide in a story book and talk about it. Then visit a slide and explain how the children climb up, slide down, and then land on their feet. Be sure to bring out the idea that it is fun.



Parents often wonder what to do about preparing a child for a trip to the doctor or for emergency treatment—especially if it's going to hurt. Johnny slips off a pile of lumber and bumps his nose. It's necessary to say to Johnny, "We'll have to go to the hospital to see the doctor so that he can fix the cut on your nose."

Johnny asks: "Will it hurt?" You can say: "Yes, it will—while the doctor's fixing it. But it's the way to make it better so it won't hurt any more." If Johnny cries at the hospital, don't be disturbed. It isn't very realistic to say to Johnny: "Don't cry, it doesn't hurt." If it hurts, be sympathetic.

This letter suggests that:

We provide opportunities for learning rather than trying to force it.

Louise H. Backus

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A long roll of sturdy brown wrapping paper is an item which many members of the household would find useful. Tear off lengths of it for children to paint on, even though the picture may not look like much to you.

This large paper can also be used to make costumes for dramatic play.

Another kind of fun for the older pre-schooler is to have the child lie down on the paper. An adult traces around his outline. The child colors himself and cuts out the figure.

When a child is out of sorts you can sometimes change the atmosphere by being ready with a song, a story, a poem.

BUNNY SONG

Here is my bunny with ears so funny,
And here is his hole in the ground.
When a noise he hears, he pricks up his ears,
And jumps in the hole with a bound.

(Right fist forms bunny, and two fingers his ears. Left hand closed to make a "hole.")

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