

IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS.



Picture the following:

Melissa, age 23 months, is scraping her lunch scraps into the bin. The expression on her face tells us she is concentrating and that “being helpful” (in her eyes) and doing a “real” job are giving her pleasure. Her concentration is so great she doesn’t see that most of the food is going onto the floor, and as she walks away steps in the peas and mashed potatoes. She has no idea her help isn’t actually very helpful, that instead of helping she is actually creating a mess for someone to clean up!

It’s really hard for young children, especially under the age of three, to figure out what the “rules of living” are. That is, what behaviour does and doesn’t meet adults’ approval, and what differentiates between being helpful and not being helpful. In fact you could say, figuring those things out is one of the biggest challenges children face in the early childhood years. There are lots of reasons for this.

Sometimes the difficulty is in not understanding, when you’re very young, the details behind differences between something being okay and not okay. Melissa has observed others doing what appears to her to be exactly the same thing she is doing, and she merely copies what she has seen others do.

The difficulty in figuring out the ‘right’ thing to do can stem from different carers giving different messages about what is okay. For example, your mum lets you put your feet on her sofa, but Grandpa doesn’t. Some things are okay to do in some places and not in others. For example, it’s okay to shout and make the loudest noises you can when you’re at the park, but adults get cross when you do the same at the dinner table. Similarly, it’s okay to splash water in the wading pool and even in the bath, but not at the water table at playgroup. At other times, the toddler does things we might not approve of simply because they don’t understand the difference. Why is throwing a ball acceptable, but throwing an orange isn’t? After all, they’re the same shape!

If in responding to Melissa’s act the carer shows disapproval or annoyance, Melissa gets a confusing message. Her intention to be helpful was good and should be encouraged, it is the execution of her intention she needs assistance with. To encourage helpfulness and support Melissa to experience the feelings of satisfaction and belonging that come as a result, show approval of her intention and appreciation of her desire to help. At the same time, demonstrate how to put the scraps in the bin, help her by holding the plate as she scrapes or even make the task easier by providing a bin with a larger opening. Carers who appreciate the value of encouraging participation are rewarded, as the task is eventually completed successfully with minimum supervision.

From these kinds of experiences, where carers seem “on-side” with toddlers, they gain feelings of competence, of being able to contribute to the life of the family or the group they are in, and become more willing to help.

If carers are critical of young children when they try to help, children will eventually stop trying.

Other common classic “good intentions, bad execution” situations when young children are trying to help:

- putting the groceries away may result in some things being spilled,
- clearing the table may lead to food on the floor,
- helping with gardening may bring about uprooted or trampled plants,
- comforting a crying baby may lead to discomfort for the baby (a not so gentle cuddle given, for example).

There are so many things that are confusing, so many mixed messages that children get every day. They need carers to help them learn acceptable behaviour, and to be firm with them sometimes. Even more, they need these carers to stop and think, when they do something unacceptable, what the situation might mean to them, and to respond accordingly. It really helps if carers try to put themselves in the toddler’s shoes and see the world the way they see it.

Sometimes young children do annoying or unhelpful things with good intentions. Showing appreciation of their intentions, even when the result is not helpful, builds confidence and self-esteem.