

# Fostering Healthy Habits in Preschoolers

Handout

November 19, 2008

Presented By:  
Sue Cohen



Sponsored by NIH Child Care Board & ORS/Division of Amenities  
and Transportation Services



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## Objectives

- Discuss healthy habits for preschoolers and the skills required for development
- Figure out your role as a parent and model in fostering self-reliance and resiliency
- Get other tips for managing and enjoying the preschool years

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## What are some "healthy habits"?

Promote Growth and Harmony in Your Family...This is essential to Fostering Healthy Habits

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Have reasonable expectations for your child's behavior

- Be familiar with developmental stages
- Match chores to developmental abilities
- Remember unreasonable expectations can turn into inappropriate behavior

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Teaching Independence:  
Developing Confidence and  
Self-Reliance in Your Child

Learning self-reliance and independence comes early. But it doesn't happen without your help...

Examples...

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Teaching Your Preschooler  
To Dress Themselves

- To learn independence, and improve their logical thinking & motor skills
- In order for your child to master the skills involved in dressing himself, he will need encouragement and opportunity to practice by himself

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## Lessen the Stress in Learning to Dress

### Teaching Tips

- Allow for extra time
- Assist without taking over
- Don't worry about order (socks don't have to go on last)
- Provide opportunities for self practice
- Have patience

### Clothing Tips

- Simple clothing (e.g., elastic waists, t-shirts)
- A size bigger for ease
- Bright colors satisfy
- Let her pick out what she wants to wear
- Offer a choice of interchangeable tops and bottoms

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## Brushing Teeth

- Why should you go to great lengths to brush your child's teeth?
  - Tooth decay occurs faster in children than in adults. By brushing your child's teeth, you remove the plaque bacteria which are responsible for this tooth decay.
  - Another reason to help your child learn to brush is that this helps them develop a crucial habit which will last a lifetime.

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## Teaching Your Preschooler To Brush Their Teeth

- The key to establishing good brushing habits is starting an oral care program early. In fact, the ADA suggests that you begin cleaning your baby's mouth the first few days after birth.
- **Parents are responsible for making sure their children's teeth are clean until the child reaches five to six years of age!** This is because, on average, younger children do not have the manual dexterity required to brush teeth effectively.

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## Make Brushing Fun!

- **Allow your children to brush your teeth! Then allow them to "brush" their own teeth. Finish by brushing your child's teeth. You may want to include older siblings in the activity.** (Or have them include their doll)
- Use only a pea-size amount of toothpaste
- Remind them to spit out the toothpaste
- Be careful of the toothpaste you use
- Remember your enthusiasm is contagious!

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## Encouragement

- Parents need to support their children in their natural quest for independence.
  - Example – Household help/chores
  - Even preschoolers can help in some ways – at every age chores teaches them responsibilities and shows them they can make a difference through their actions
- But be careful. Your child can sense if you're concerned about their abilities. Let them know that it's a big help to have them involved and give them jobs they can accomplish. If you're apprehensive about their safety or performance give them another job.

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## Allowance

- Model self-reliance in your own behavior.
- Show them step-by-step how a project is done.
- Discuss the goal so they go in the right direction.
- Make the project fun! Time it. Do it backwards. Dance. Make a game out of it.
- Set timelines, but let your children complete it their own way. Let them do the job in parts so they succeed each time they work on it.
- Let them fail. Let your children try things their way and learn from failure.
- When they forget to do a chore, show them the consequences, but don't do the job for them.

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## Support

- Step in to support your children when their approach is unsafe, unhealthy or disruptive.
- In general, make yourself available to help, but encourage them to work through any snags they hit on their own.
- If you do step in, emphasize what's working and then suggest ways to do the job better, or consider doing the job together.
- If the job is done well enough... leave well enough alone. Perfection is not the aim. Unless the work needs to be corrected for a very good reason congratulate your children on their efforts. And praise them often.

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## Learn from mistakes

- Tell them everyone makes mistakes.
- Tell them it's the effort that counts.
- Tell them you love them no matter what.
- Point out what they did right.
- Ask them how they could do it differently.
- Encourage them to do the job using their new approach.

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## Role Model

- You cannot NOT model
- Listen well and talk respectfully.
- Practice time management
- Manage your stress
- Model appropriate coping skills
- Model and talk about healthy habits – eating, sleeping, exercising

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## Communication

- Work on active listening
- Solve problems together
- Seek out your child's opinions and ideas
- Listen well and talk respectfully
- Acknowledge feelings without judging
- Focus on your child without being distracted
- Communicate your expectations

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## Healthy, Happy Mealtime

- Make family meals a regular affair
- Keep mealtime focused on positive conversation - avoid fighting/disciplining at dinner table
- Be a role-model for child at the table and in your eating habits
- Serve new foods repeatedly – it can take more than 20 times of thinking, playing, feeling, tasting, and finally swallowing for food acceptance
- Introduce new textures early and often

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What will you try?

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## Thank You

- Please take a moment to complete the evaluation form provided. Your input is appreciated.

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# Realistic Expectations of Your Preschooler

## **Anticipate your preschooler to...**

- Need lots of physical activity
- Gain more control over his body and become more adept at self-help skills
- Establish self as separate from parents; become more independent
- Play *with*, rather than *beside*, other children; understand cooperation
- Show empathy and want to please
- Be interested in words, ask questions, experiment with profanity, enjoy being silly
- Exaggerate, boast, tell stories, have imaginary friends, engage in fantasy play, have some difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality
- Have fears and anxieties
- Begin to understand right from wrong and relationship between behavior and consequences; can understand and follow rules
- Have awareness of sexuality
- Fall in love with mother (boys) or father (girls)
- Be bossy; order people around

## **Anticipate your young school-ager to...**

- Be curious and eager to learn
- Understand the differences between right and wrong, fantasy and reality
- Be more interested in real tasks with concrete goals
- Begin to develop a conscience, sense of morality, and sense of justice
- Test the limits of physical abilities, sometimes recklessly
- Need to make choices and decisions within limits
- Understand relationship between behavior and consequences
- Feel attached to parents but want more independence
- Be influenced by peer group
- Seek recognition and appreciate praise
- Show empathy; Understand other people's feelings
- Be sensitive to failure

# The Language of Learned Helplessness: Quiz

Chick Moorman (<http://www.familyresource.com/contributors/113/>)

Not many parents set out to raise a thirty-year-old Nintendo player who sprawls on the couch all day sucking up pizza and diet Pepsi. Yet many parents actually subvert their positive intention of raising responsible, confident, fully functioning children. They do it by unconsciously using Parent Talk that allows and encourages helplessness. What about your Parent Talk? Is it filled with language that builds autonomy and independence? Or is it filled with words and phrases that teach your children dependence? To find out, take the following Parent Talk Language of Learned Helplessness Quiz. Read the statements below to determine whether or not they occur regularly in your language patterns.

1. "Let me get that for you."
2. "I'll do it."
3. "Act as if you can."
4. "Let me handle that."
5. "Let me demonstrate for you."
6. "I'll get you started. You do the rest."
7. "Take a risk and see if you can do it."
8. "I'll talk to your mother and see if I can get her to change her mind."
9. "It was raining, so I put your bike in the garage."
10. "What possibilities do you see?"
11. "Sounds like you have a problem. What have you thought of so far?"
12. "I'll fix it for you."
13. "I'll send your teacher a note and get her to give you more time."
14. "That's too difficult for you."
15. "It's late so I'll let it go this time."
16. "Would you like me to teach you how to do that?"
17. "You are old enough to begin doing your own laundry. Come on, I'll show you how."
18. "Ask me if you need any help."
19. "I'll call the store for you and see if they have any left in stock."
20. "The cleaning lady will be here on Monday, so put away anything you don't want moved in your room."

## Language of Learned Helplessness: Discussion

If you are regularly using the language of learned helplessness, you may be an over-functioning parent. You may be performing tasks, rescuing, and taking over to the degree that your child is being deprived of learning his or her own lessons. Inadvertently, you may be encouraging your child to stop doing things for him or herself. Check it out.

1. "Let me get that for you." (Learned Helplessness) Allow children to get things for themselves, or teach them to ask for help.
2. "I'll do it." (Learned Helplessness) If you do for, do for, do for, children don't learn to do for themselves. This creates dependence.
3. "Act as if you can." This phrase encourages autonomy.
4. "Let me handle that." (Learned Helplessness) Let children handle things. Experience is messy. Let them learn from experience.
5. "Let me demonstrate for you." Demonstrating is teaching. This helps them become independent.
6. "I'll get you started. You do the rest." This is another example of teaching. If you want a behavior, you have to teach a behavior. Teach your children the system, and then let them use the system.
7. "Take a risk and see if you can do it." This way of speaking makes you dispensable rather than indispensable.
8. "I'll talk to your mother and see if I can get her to change her mind." (Learned Helplessness) Whose relationship with the mother is this? Yours or the child's?
9. "It was raining, so I put your bike in the garage." (Learned Helplessness) If you do this once, okay. If you do it twice, you have set up an expectation. If you do it three times, congratulations - you now have a new job.
10. "What possibilities do you see?" This style of Parent Talk promotes possibility thinking and helps children see a variety of alternatives.
11. "Sounds like you have a problem. What have you thought of so far?" This promotes a search for solutions and lets children know you see them as problem solvers.
12. "I'll fix it for you." (Learned Helplessness) If we keep fixing things for youngsters, they have no reason to learn to fix things for themselves.
13. "I'll send your teacher a note and get her to give you more time." (Learned Helplessness) This is a classic rescue. Your children will learn a more valuable lesson if you allow them to experience consequences.
14. "That's too difficult for you." (Learned Helplessness) Allow children to decide the degree of difficulty unless this is a safety or health issue.
15. "It's late so I'll let it go this time." (Learned Helplessness) Every time you let it go, you teach children that someone will bail them out and they won't have to live with the consequences of their actions.
16. "Would you like me to teach you how to do that?" This Parent Talk allows children to determine whether or not they want help. If they do, teaching is more helpful than doing.

17. "You are old enough to be doing your own laundry. Come on, I'll show you how." Your job is to teach them how. Their job is to do it.
18. "Ask me if you need any help." If you help before they ask, they won't learn how to ask.
19. "I'll call the store for you and see if they have any left in stock." (Learned Helplessness) If they won't call the store themselves, they don't want the item badly enough to have it. If they don't know how to call the store, teach them to use a phone book.
20. "The cleaning lady will be here on Monday, so put away anything you don't want moved in your room." (Learned Helplessness) Whatever happened to children cleaning their own rooms? If you want to raise kids who feel entitled, pay someone to clean their rooms.



## Online Resources & Books

- **How to Teach Your Toddler to Do Chores,**  
<http://www.babycenter.com/refcap/toddler/toddlerbehavior/11948.html>
- **Techniques That Guide Us to Teach Children to Be Respectful, Responsible and Cooperative,** <http://www.realdiscipline.com/>
- **“Parenting With Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility”** by Foster W. Cline
- **“Love and Logic Magic for Early Childhood: Practical Parenting from Birth to Six Years”**  
by Jim Fay
- **“Parent Talk: How to Talk to Your Child in Language That Builds Self-Esteem and Encourages Responsibility”** by Chick Moorman
- **“Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World: Seven Building Blocks for Developing Capable Young People”** by H. Stephen Glenn, Jane Nelsen ED.D.
- **“Raising Children Who Think for Themselves”** by Elisa Medhus, M.D.
- **“Stop Parenting & Start Coaching”** by Carol Carter, Gary Izuno, and Joe Martin
- **“Majoring in the Rest of Your Life: Career Secrets for College Students”** by Carol Carter

This seminar was presented by  
**Sue Cohen**

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Sue Cohen has over thirty years of experience in the fields of child development and parent education. She has been a teacher, researcher and administrator.

Currently, she is a trainer with LifeWork Strategies and presents seminars on issues across the parenting spectrum, including balance between work and family, stress management and family issues and relationships. She also consults and mentors early childhood programs and coaches parents on improving their strategies for creating happier families.

Sue is a proud mother of three grown children and grandmother to two fabulous grandchildren!

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