

Who Cleans Up?

“Who Cleans Up?” is a question we often get from visiting parents and educators. The reason is obvious. On a typical day, the children use every square inch of the school and by the end of that time it looks — lived in. Our classes are only 2.5 hours long. The last thing I want to do is interrupt the children’s play. Requiring them to join in the cleaning would do exactly that. They are here for such a short period of time. I’m hoping they will fill that time with as much play as possible.

They always come armed with a followup question. But, “what about teaching them the importance of taking care of their school?” and that “cleaning up is a necessary part of life? It teaches them responsibility, right?” Nope.

This begs the question: How do children learn such things? I’m not referring to only clean-up, but about work and life in general? They learn by watching what we do. By “we” I mean the teachers and participating parents (and other children, too). Children learn about responsibility by being around adults that act in responsible ways. We provide supervision and we clean up knowing the children take notice.

Some suggest we are guilty of indulging the children? I suppose so if trying our best to meet their individual wants and needs qualifies as being indulgent. But, if there is a more appropriate time to do this in a child’s lifetime than early childhood, I would like to know what it is.

There are many centers that have rules like this: “If you play in an area you have to clean up before moving on.” I have observed two kinds of behavior in reaction to this rule. The first is the children avoid playing in “that” area. But what if it is something like the block area, which I value a lot for the exploration, the learning, and the fun that happen there? This rule essentially creates a wall between the kids and some awesome learning opportunities. The other behavior I have witnessed is the “dump and dash” technique. Children are very skilled at adopting strategies that serve their needs. A quick look to see if an adult is watching and, if not ... well, you know the rest.

Sometimes our children volunteer to help out and I always honor their request. But, I also accept that now it’s going to take longer and I won’t be able to locate the stuff they put away later. Young children have some peculiar notions about sorting and storage. When the adults go about the business of taking care of this place (by cleaning and repairing), children conclude, “Oh, so that’s what people do.”

For instance, yesterday two children, both moving on to Kindergarten next year, decided on their own to clean every trike in our inventory. Note: we have accommodated the children’s desire to move around by acquiring enough trikes for the entire school to be mobile simultaneously. The two of them scrubbed the trikes with soap and sponges then hosed them off. Other children took notice and soon the process began all over again. I found myself wondering if their motivation had something to do with leaving the school in good shape for the children who will be joining us next September.

Not all work here is met with resignation just as not all play is necessarily all fun and games. Kids will work hard at work worth doing. It matters a lot to them to have control over doing the



work and that it mirrors something they witness when adults model taking care of the school. Children accepting the responsibility is different when it's their choice rather than as a directive or "the Rule." David Elkind wrote in The Power of Play about what you need to live a full and happy life: Play, Love and Work. We try to create a place for children that honors those three things.

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