

LABOR and LIFE

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I'm writing in September. Labor Day – the holiday to honor “work” - is over and for children and teens summer is over and school labor has begun. Seems like a good time to talk about labor, and to consider our role in convincing young people of the realities and benefits of work. Most adults are not terribly different than children in that given a choice between work and play, we will usually choose play. Believe it or not, there are actually many similarities between work and play. Work, like play, provides opportunity to use one's unique mind and individual talents and abilities, thus providing many ways of enhancing self-esteem and giving us a good sense of ourselves. In choosing how to spend one's life it's good to know what our strengths and gifts are, as well as where we are limited.

Adults should never apologize for asking children to work! We never want to start a sentence introducing a chore with the words “I'm sorry”: “I'm sorry but you'll have to clean your room before you go out to play”. There are no reasons why children, even very young children, cannot contribute to the life of their household – however large or small – through some form of work. It is not a favor to children to excuse them from learning early about both the necessity and value of work.

In a treatment setting, work also has therapeutic value. It is important that our clients find ways to recognize their personal value when life so far has often given them the message that they are not worth much – not worth protecting, not worth a stable place to live, not worth letting them hold onto their familiar friends, pets, and neighborhoods. But they, like everyone, are as much a part of nature as every other creature, and all parts of nature have things to do to contribute to the good of all. Branches of trees provide homes for the birds; the running spring waters supply drink for the animals; the growing grass and grain offer food for cattle and humans. Working is the way humans contribute to life – to the well-being of other humans we live with, and to our pets and any others who depend on us.

There are two kinds of work, and we want our children and youth to experience both. Some things just have to be done, whether or not we enjoy the task. Other tasks/jobs can be very pleasurable. If we do not give children the opportunity to engage in work that is satisfying in childhood they risk joining the ranks of people who “work for a living” but who do not find joy and meaning in their work. Work does not have to be a drudge. Some people very much enjoy “weeding the

garden”, believe it or not. Tell your clients why you chose your job and what parts of your work you find meaningful and enjoyable. You can also share the parts of your job that you are less than thrilled with, so that the young people in your care come to understand that most, if not all, “jobs” have a mix of pain and pleasure.

If you have a kid who likes taking out the trash because it gives them a chance to show off their strength, let them know they can aim for employment as a “sanitation engineer” and actually make some pretty good money. On the other hand, maybe taking out the trash is just something that has to be done. Fixing things that are broken gives some people a kick and a sense of accomplishment. There will always be “repair” jobs. Some people like to paint or decorate, others like to tinker with computers or electronics. Since most people have to work most of their lives, identity gets pretty closely tied to what we do for work. Help your kids find tasks and skills they want to be identified with. In many ways, our work reflects who we are and who we’d like to be.

Many of our kids don’t like school because they are challenged by being asked to do tasks that overwhelm them. School is like all work: some of it just has to be done, but some of it can bring joy because some subjects fits our interests and abilities. Help your kids to focus mostly on those tasks in school that suit who they are and where they shine, while acknowledging that others just have to be put up with – like taking out the trash. Let kids engage in “tasks” with different staff members who display different strengths and interests. Let them grow things with the gardener; fix things with the fixer; write things with the staff person who loves to write; count the petty cash; or learn about the computer with the staff geek.

We can be helpful in introducing kids to the rewards of completing a task. Be sure to notice and find a way to “reward” a completed project – even if it’s just clapping or patting them on the back. We won’t be giving out paychecks but there are many different rewards for working: acknowledgments from others, feelings of satisfaction and pride, having something we can enjoy. A worthwhile task helps us to feel worthwhile.

I have memories of staff whining at me when it was time to “check chores” and telling me they didn’t think they went to college to end up checking chores. I told them that’s exactly why they went to college. Chores serve treatment values as well as keeping the living space up. It’s not good to ask a child whose mind often feels chaotic and stressed to come home from school and enter a chaotic environment. When your mind feels “a mess” it is important that your surroundings look clean and orderly, to give your being some respite. It’s also not

fair to allow young people to enter adulthood thinking that works get magically done by someone else; it's a gift to have learned that work is part of living, provides necessities, and makes our environment a place we want to spend time in.

Finally, finding a way to come to peace with the fact that almost everyone has to work is just practical. We will have done our clients a real favor when they realize that work is the principle means whereby people get what they want, and avoid what they don't want. So now, let's GET TO WORK.