

To Work is to Serve

Developing an attitude of service can begin very early in life. In many ways, our early experiences determine our future avenues of service, and can influence whether we choose a profession that aims to serve others or one that primarily fulfills our own self-interests.

We know that children are very sensitive to the roles that adults play in their daily lives. They look up to, adore, and admire the work of adults around them. They also set goals for themselves based on what they see and experience first-hand. The development of an attitude of service depends on the extent to which service, by and for others, is a daily part of their lives. As children carefully notice the effect of their acts of service on others, they are encouraged to continue and enlarge their sphere of influence as they get older.

I recently heard a true story of one such person. When she was a little girl, let's call her Katy, she would often visit her grandmother, who was a university professor and loved to cook. Her grandmother often had guests and students visiting, and whenever she could, she would cook a great big meal to serve everyone. Katy would sit on the kitchen counter and watch her grandmother cut tomatoes, celery, and onions, and put them all together to make a big stew. Sometimes, she would help her grandmother break off chocolate pieces to stir into a pot and watched her make delicious chocolate frosting for desert. Katy enjoyed those days with her grandmother, and felt the warmth and hospitality she showered on all her guests. As Katy grew older, she had the opportunity to travel around the world. She continued to share her grandmother's interest in food and hospitality, and tried many different kinds of food. She became a good cook herself, and often had many friends over to share her interesting dishes. Katy soon started writing articles and cookbooks so that her friends could learn how to cook for others too.

Katy never forgot how her grandmother always joyfully served others. She is grateful for her grandmother's example, and now enjoys a successful career because she learned how to do things in a spirit of service.

There are many ways to prepare ourselves and our children for a life of service. When we develop an attitude of service towards others, we are also opening doors to experience the joy of service in our own lives. Here are two other attitudes that can help us in our pursuit of service:

1. Seeing the value in everyone's work – To serve others we also need to cultivate the virtues of humility and thankfulness. We can develop humility by recognizing the inherent value in everyone's work, no matter how unimportant it may seem at first. To help children recognize the value of all the various types of work people do, we can only ask them to imagine "What would the world be like if the farmer stopped growing food?" "Who would drive the bus if there were no bus

drivers?” “Where would people live if the builders stopped building?” When we take the time to appreciate the hard work of people around us, we are passing along a sense of respect for others and the valuable contributions they make. Children can see that their lives have been affected because many others put their time, talents, and energy into their work to help them live a better life. They are then motivated to think of their own life’s work as service to others. What they have received they can also give back through their own work.

2. Have a world-embracing vision – Children of school age begin to learn that the universe is so vast, and the earth we live on, by comparison, is so small. We humans are an even smaller part of the earth, and each of us is made of smaller particles still. It is amazing that when it comes down to the minutest particles of all, we share them with the whole universe, the same as everyone else. We are part of the whole, and the whole is within us. When presented in simple and concrete language, with pictures of the earth and the different planets, for example, children can begin to appreciate the vastness of the universe. There are also many great resources that show the diversity of the human family and the values that unite us. For example, simple stories that show children playing in a variety of cultures and settings are invaluable resources to awaken children’s sensibilities. In order to truly live a life of service to humanity, we must have a world-embracing vision that recognizes us all as members of one human family, living on a relatively small planet we call home.

Living a life of service is a lofty goal. It can even seem daunting when we compare ourselves to other great figures that have truly dedicated their lives to others without any thought of themselves. While we can always keep their examples in our hearts to guide us, we can also look at our very own talents and capacities as gifts that can be used for the service of others. It is important to encourage our children to develop their own special talents for this very reason. Service doesn’t have to be a painful process outside of the work or pastime that we enjoy doing. We do what we do with the motivation of service in our heart. As parents and educators we encourage our children’s unique interests and pursuits, as these may very well be the tools and avenues of service our children will offer society.

So, “What would the world be like if you didn’t do what you do?”

By Zaynab Twaddell
For The Children’s Virtues Development Project