

# Mastering Life's Tasks

- *My baby Sharon refuses to sleep through the night. Instead she wakes us up and wants to play.*
- *Bobby, my 2-year-old son, keeps emptying things. He takes pans out of cupboards, clothes out of drawers, and contents out of any pocketbook in sight.*



admit it.

There are times when you just don't understand your children. You lose patience, and sometimes even your sense of humor.

But if you take a closer look at the things your children do, you'll see that they're really trying to tackle the tasks of growing up. And they're doing the best they know how.

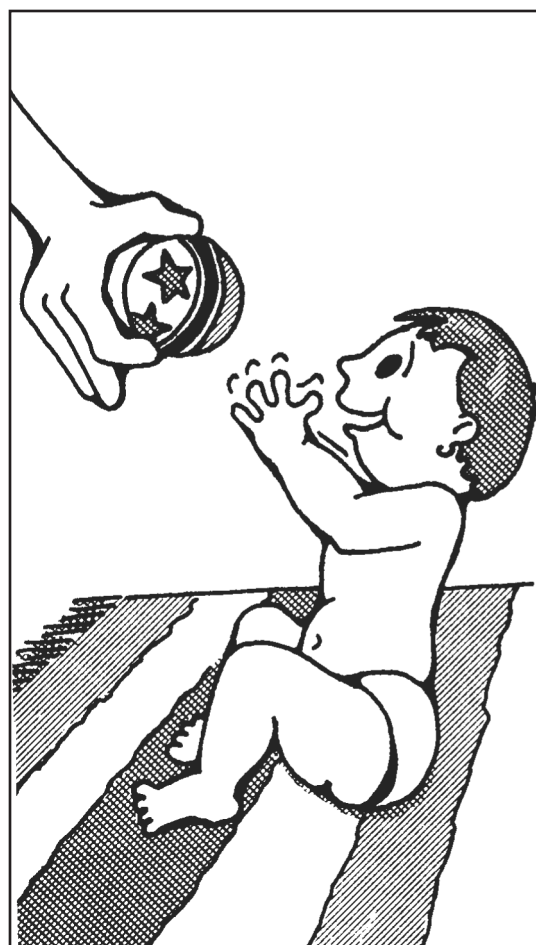
## The aim's the same

You want your children to learn and grow. They don't have to be pushed and prodded. They're born with the urge to move forward. Normal development compels them to work on life's tasks, like:

- gaining control over their bodies,
- communicating with others,
- getting along with other people,
- becoming independent,
- learning who they are and who they can become,
- thinking and solving problems, and
- forming values and beliefs.

They cannot, however, master these tasks in a day. There are certain things to learn and appropriate ways to act at each age, whether it is 2, 12, or 22. Each step forward builds on the previous ones. Children hold their heads up before they sit, cry before they talk, hoard things before they share them.

Though everyone works at life's tasks, the urge to grow and change seems strongest in children. Children approach these tasks with great zest and ingenuity. Somehow they find a way to practice skills at any time and any place. Two-year-old Bobby empties drawers,



cupboards, and bookshelves. Exploring each new container, he gains coordination. He learns about space and sizes. And when he masters these tasks, he takes on new challenges.

## Growing pains



Sometimes the ways children work at these tasks are not easy to live with. Learning involves trial and error. In learning to get along with others, for instance, children test people out. They pinch and tease as well as smile and hug. In trying to be independent, children go overboard. They sometimes say "no" to everything. Squabbles are inevitable. Such conflicts may annoy you, but they are a healthy and important part of learning. They are children's best efforts.

It's hard, too, for children to keep grownup rules in mind when they are practicing a new skill. Beds look perfect for jumping. Toothpaste asks to be squeezed. Children are just learning to predict what will happen and what can go wrong. They're discovering how things work and how much they can do. They make mistakes, naturally, but at the moment they just don't know there are better ways.

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# H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

## Growing together

Growing up really is hard to do. Tasks such as sharing take time to learn. You can ease the way, though. Look behind your children's behavior and try to discover what life tasks they are working on.

If there's a better way to accomplish a task, help your children find it.

If there is no better way, try to live with the behavior. Many times it will be outgrown.

Sometimes when you understand a behavior, it doesn't seem as irritating. You can be more patient with your

toddler's endless questions, for example, if you know this is the way he or she learns new words and takes part in the conversation.

Sometimes you can help children find other ways to practice tasks. An old tire in the back yard can meet a child's need to jump as well as your living room sofa can.

Sometimes, though, you just have to be patient while your child masters a task like sleeping through the night. At these times it helps to remember that children do grow up—usually in a direction that makes them easier to live with. In the meantime, though, they just do their best.

Here are some examples of ways children behave when they are trying to grow up. In each case, note what task children are working on, and think about how this knowledge might change your attitude and response to their behavior.

### When babies . . .

Study faces, pull hair, poke, grab your glasses and earrings

Cry for every want or, later, babble, smile, wave arms, and kick legs as well

### This may help them . . .

See themselves as physically separate from other people

Express themselves in many ways

### To master the task of . . .

Becoming independent from parents and other adults

Communicating with others

### When toddlers . . .

Are constantly in motion, emptying drawers, jumping on sofas and beds

Ask questions such as "What's that?" endlessly

"Get into" parents' razors, shoes, lipstick, and wallets, and copy parents' actions

### This may help them . . .

Develop large and small muscle control

Learn about their environment and what it means to be a grownup

Learn words, get attention, discover shapes, sizes, colors, etc.

### To master the task of . . .

Gaining control over their bodies

Always learning and communicating with others

Learning who they are and who they can become

### When preschoolers . . .

Hit, threaten, take toys, and exclude other children

Refuse your help getting dressed, even if they put their clothes on backwards

Make forts and houses with household furniture, blankets, or pillows

### This may help them . . .

Play with others but still get their own way

Learn how to dress and take care of themselves

Use and interpret symbols that stand for real objects, events, or people

### To master the task of . . .

Getting along with other people

Becoming independent

Thinking and solving problems

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