



# CONTRIBUTING LEADS TO BELONGING

By Wilson McCaskill

I have written this article for families (although I would urge teachers to read it as well). Please feel free to include it in your school newsletter if you think it will help and be of interest. The section, titled, "In Schools" is a continuation of the topic but as the title implies, is applicable for schools, not home.

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I am asked many questions at workshops we hold for parents of schools implementing Play Is The Way and although the questions vary they, in essence, have a common core; what is one thing I need to be doing to ensure my kids do all right? My answer, although simple, surprises most parents. Give them every opportunity to contribute, contribute, contribute.

Finding ways for children to contribute to family life is so much harder these days. Gone are so many opportunities we once took for granted.

Homes have dishwashers and robot vacuum cleaners, there's no need to hang out washing, just chuck it in the dryer, the lawnmower man cuts the lawn, some professional does the windows, trimming the hedge is too dangerous, washing the dog needs a professional too, sweeping the driveway is just a waste of time, washing the car is best done at the autowash, dusting the house triggers allergies, fitted sheets and duvets have turned bed making into a lost art, preparing meals is something done on reality TV, weeding the garden simply doesn't make sense because they keep coming back and asking children to clean bathrooms and toilets is treating them like second class citizens.

The lack of opportunities to contribute makes it hard for children to experience the rewards of behaviour that leads to the betterment of themselves their families and their communities. It has made it hard for them to see beyond their own needs to the needs of others. It has removed a powerful way for children to feel a sense of real worth and belonging. So much so, that when asked to make a contribution they are often quick to see it as an inconvenience and imposition and not an opportunity to feel good from doing good.

We are all advantaged by acts of giving. Given opportunities to be helpful and kind in our formative years ensures that we continue to reap the psychological rewards of remaining so. Playing our part in the machinery of family and community allows us to respect the parts played by others. Contributing builds our understanding and appreciation of differences, strengths and weaknesses. It makes us more tolerant, more aware, more expressive and more likely to ask for help and volunteer to help.



Without opportunities to contribute children too easily become self-centered, selfish, entitled and dismissive of the plight, states and needs of others.

It is time for families to find lots of ways for children to contribute. Schools need to do it as well as all the various clubs and organisations that children attend after school and on weekends and holidays. Furthermore, we must not think that children should only contribute if they find it fun to do so. Doing the dishes is rarely fun. Feeding and cleaning up after pets can be annoying but doing so helps to shoulder the burden of household duties and shows a commitment to mutual respect and fairness.

Parents should keep their eye out for spontaneous opportunities such as helping elderly Mr. Davies unload his car or to help a fellow citizen pick up the contents of a burst shopping bag and prompt their children to assist. There would be few of us who do not know of the mental health and wellbeing benefits of random acts of kindness. Such acts are more likely to occur when contributing has become an entrenched habit of behaviour. The challenge is to create the opportunities for children to contribute, because habits are made with practise.

We should not be conned into thinking just because technology has accelerated at a mind-boggling speed, our children's human needs have changed as quickly. They still want and need to belong. They still benefit from meaningful face on face connection. And they still feel good about themselves when they help and support others and the mistake would be to reward them for doing so. This mistake would cheapen an act of generosity and caring by turning it into a task for material gain. You should of course, show your appreciation and acknowledge their contribution.

It is 2017 and if children are going to stay genuinely connected to their families, communities and peers, then perhaps we need to accept that many values of the past are still relevant today.

## **IN SCHOOLS**

There are some ways for children to contribute in classrooms and schools but too often these are used as rewards or inducements. If Danny behaves or has been behaving he is permitted to carry the bag of balls down to the oval. Because Jenny has been playing nicely with Tina they can both help the teacher distribute the craft materials. Henry is asked to take a note to the office because he consistently puts his hand up and waits for permission before he speaks.

So many tasks that students could do have been assigned to paid adults. Students can't contribute by sweeping, cleaning, clearing, fixing, painting, hauling, heaving, taking out, taking back, carrying or lifting. Their task is to learn and their main contribution is to behave properly as they do so. That is simply the order of things - and with a host of justifiable reasons; not the least of which is duty of care and the exceedingly litigious society in which we live.

This is a pity because school, like family, could be the ideal place to practise contributing to the betterment of others. It could be a place where children discover the inner rewards of volunteering for tasks pleasant and unpleasant, fun and boring. It



could be a place where children learn to see themselves and each other in the light of shared responsibilities – a place where differences of race, culture, capabilities, gender, creed and personality are unified into common and uplifting acts of contribution. School could be a place where children learn to value themselves as givers and helpers; as contributors to an inclusive community made strong by the virtue of helping each other.

Knowing that opportunities to develop the habit of contributing are scarce in schools and families we may be wise, before we criticise the behaviour of children in this automated, digitized, fast food, fake news, constant noise, endless judgment, sound bite, never switch off world to remember that children learn and live in ways and means that we, the big people, bought into and set up.

I know it is not possible for today's schools to become environments with a multitude of ways for children to contribute with high expectations they will do so. However, whatever ways are found, can only be of help. Our creativity in expanding the number of ways may end up being our biggest contribution to their mental health and well-being.