

Helping to transform a child's possessive instinct

For the child under the age of seven years an indicator of on-track development is the sublimation of the possessive instinct. This transformation of the possessive instinct occurs when the child is given an environment where he or she has the right to use the materials as long as he or she wishes, while respecting other's right to do the same.

In the next stage of a child's development, from around 6 to 12 years, "mine" becomes an important concept as the child brings tools and toys for group activities. But for the younger child the materials in the environment are seen as community property, much like the way we think of a library. When we check out a book we can use it knowing that no one is going to ask for it back or take it from us until we are finished.

Our inner being knows when our needs are being met or unmet as the case may be. When needs are being met in the young child, the

possessive instinct modifies and we rarely hear the word "mine" coming from the young child.

A child's love of working alone, and being able to naturally develop the qualities inherent in normal and healthy development, transform this instinct to own individual



items in the child's environment.

Parents over the years have asked me about the right age to get a pet for a child. My usual answer is, "Children are ready for a pet after they have kept a plant alive for a year."

In the initial stages of taking care of a plant, a young child is in

the first stage of gaining knowledge by simply learning the facts of life about the plant, sometimes through mishandling (which at this point is ignorance) of the plant. The child learns that: Plants need soil to grow. Plants have roots that need to be kept in the soil. Plants need

water, sunshine and warmth. They need their leaves. They need their stems or trunks to be unbroken. They need to be protected from outside forces – rainstorms, snow, animals, insects, etc.

As the child gains knowledge of the plant, an understanding of the needs of the plant develops within the child, an understanding that we might also see as love. From this love comes a desire to serve the needs of the plant. The plant then thrives. From experience comes knowledge, then love and respect, and at last, a desire to be of service.

To the child, the plant goes from being "my plant" to "the plant" during this development of knowl-



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edge, love and service. The child doesn't need to "own the plant" once the "need to know" the plant is being satisfied. In normal development the child's interest in an object becomes one of seeking knowledge of the object versus having possession of it.

Knowledge, understanding, love and service create a sublimation of the possessive instinct in the child. That is the path of normal development for healthy human beings. When you see it in your child you'll know that they'll be ready and able to take care of the dog.

Kids Talk™ is an award-winning column dealing with childhood development issues written by Maren Stark Schmidt, M.Ed. She has more than 25 years experience working with young children and is the author of Understanding Montessori: A Guide for Parents. Contact her via e-mail at maren@kidstalknews.com.

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