



TERM 05

TOPIC

Parents Newsletter

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STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD KICK THE “HELPLESS” HABIT

It's 7pm in the evening. You asked your child to put their pjs on. You think that's a reasonable request, but your child says, "I can't do it, I need your help." You smile and say, "I am sure you can". When your child replies in a whiny voice "I can't do it! It's too hard!", you sigh, roll your eyes, look at the clock, decide to go for an easy life and help them.

Does this sound familiar? I am sure all of us recognise this scenario – you know your child is perfectly capable of doing things by themselves, but for whatever reason they always want you involved. You become irritated but eventually give in. If this happens occasionally and especially if it coincides with your child being in a compromised state (too hungry, too thirsty, too tired, too emotionally exhausted...), likelihood is they are just finding it hard to deal with the situation in that moment. They'll most probably get back to being able to do things by themselves as soon as they feel better. But if this sort of helpless behaviour is something that is very common in your house, read on to find out what you can do about it.

a normal request...

Firstly, we need to distinguish between a normal request and a special service. A **normal request** is about a child asking for your help when they can't do something. For example, tying their shoelaces if they haven't learnt how to do them. This is about skills deficit, not attention. What we need to do in this situation is dedicate time to teach the child the skills they lack and then encourage them to complete the task by themselves.

a special service...

On the other side, a **special service** is about a child asking for your help to do something you know they can do themselves. For example, if your child knows how to dress themselves but every morning and night, they want you to do it is a sign that they are asking for a special service. Very often, if that is the case, we feel angry and begrudge helping, while your child looks very satisfied and "high" on the feeling of power - they've just played their "I am helpless" card very well.

How to tell the difference between a normal request and a special service? Two questions to consider:

- Have you spent the time to teach the child how to do the task? Have you seen them do it before? If the answer is "No", it is likely that your child's request is normal and genuine.
- What is your gut telling you? If you feel manipulated, irritated and like you are being taken advantage of, likelihood is that you are dealing with a special service.

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Strategies to use to kick the “helpless habit”:

- **Take time to train:** As Amy Mccready says, “Training is an investment in good behaviour”. Observe your child, assess their skills, and decide on one you’d like to start with. Then dedicate time to teach how to do this skill. Be patient and allow time for plenty of repetitions. Insert some humour and playfulness to increase chances to succeed. The tool is powerful because it gives the child your attention in a positive way; it teaches them skills which then improves their sense of confidence and self-worth resulting in diminished need to request a special service.
- **Be sure that what you are asking is feasible:** if you say to your child to brush their teeth and they respond with “But I can’t get the toothbrush, help me!”, the child isn’t being awkward, what we asked them to do wasn’t feasible. Have a conversation with your child before the task is due to be done. Tell them what you expect from them and ask if they’ve have got everything they need to be able to complete the task without you. Once things are put in place for them to be able to succeed, you can confidently step back.
- **Step back:** the root of the problem with the “helpless habit” lies in your child’s need to control and have your attention. It is a lot harder for them to be “helpless” if there isn’t an audience to draw into “audience participation”. So, if you are certain that your child knows how to do the task, that they have everything they need to succeed, then say to them “I have every faith in you to do this by yourself. I will be in your bedroom when you are ready for the story” and walk away. For you to be able to do this, it is essential that you stay calm, composed and not to react to the exhibited “helplessness”.
- **Use the “as soon as” formula:** when your child demands your help, try saying “I am sure you can do it yourself. And as soon as you put the dirty clothes away, we will go to the park”. This can be powerful because we are delaying something more appealing until a less attractive activity is completed. This removes the locus of control from you and places it on the child which in turn meets their need to feel significant. As a bonus, consequence for not completing the task is already built in.

As with most things, teaching your child to kick their “helpless” habit takes time. So being patient and persistent is the best thing you can do. If, during the process, you find that you need additional support, please contact Marijana (marijana@move-more.org) and Trish (trish@move-more.org) – they will be more than happy to talk to you.

