



Why Do Our Children Do What They Do?

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

We were sitting down to dinner. My youngest was tapping his spoon against a bowl, fascinated by the sound it made. My middle child was asking a series of questions: "What does it mean to get an education? Why do people go to school? Why was Malala shot? Why are there wars?" The oldest was getting frustrated with the other two, wanting them to follow directions and have their dinner places in order.

In that chaotic moment before dinner, it's easy for exasperation to take over. As adults we might sometimes wonder what in the world propels our children. Really, what are they thinking when they try making holes by poking the table with a fork?

We are born with innate human characteristics. We are hard wired to explore, work, connect, and communicate. We crave order in our surroundings. We imagine possibilities. We create. We need to orient to what is around us, move our bodies, and wonder about the how and why. These human tendencies are unconscious, universal drives and they are at play from birth.

Thus the newborn is able to have familiar landmarks when she hears her mother's heartbeat. If allowed to be on the floor, she will rotate her body and move in amazing ways. This drive to move actually propels the infant into scooting, crawling, and eventually coming to that upright position that allows her to use her hands and really explore her environment.

We recognize these needs in our infants, but that vital life force is powerful for older children, too. When my son was exploring the noise of his spoon against a bowl, he wasn't trying to aggravate me. He was just exploring cause and effect, and delighting in the auditory result.

When we take time to remember that children are compelled by basic human tendencies, we can begin to support those tendencies and, as such, help our children become their best selves.

Our home and learning environments can provide children with a sense of order. Knowing where one's things go and how to help contribute to a task provides children with a sense of security and belonging. Just think about the feeling of uncertainty you can get when you visit someone's home and don't know whether to take off your shoes, where to hang your coat, or even how to be useful.

We can prepare our children for routines and offer accessible spaces that allow them to participate in the functioning of the day. They can help set the table, feed the cats, gather the laundry, prepare their lunches, and so much more. By participating in a meaningful way, they feel significant and ultimately more confident.

My middle child's constant questioning merely came from her need for intellectual exploration. Her big questions spoke to her newfound mental ability to ponder big questions about the

world. As our children venture into new territory, either physically or intellectually, they benefit from opportunities to test their ideas and make connections to what they already know.

My oldest tried to create order around her, yet as social beings we have to learn ways to collaborate effectively. The earliest humans had to cooperate to survive. As such, my older daughter merely needed some light support to find a way to communicate and connect with her siblings, rather than lapsing into exasperation.

Human tendencies compel our children. They compel us. If we keep these innate drives in mind, we just might have more compassion for our children and ourselves.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker, Director of Education at The Montessori School of the Berkshires, loves thinking about fundamental human tendencies and how they underlie so much of our very human behavior. www.berkshireremontessori.org



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