



Help yourself - August 2006

At a local school I recently spotted a mum picking up her three children. As they walked to the car mum was overloaded with three backpacks and other bits and pieces while the children carried, well, nothing! It was then I realised most mothers were doing the same thing.

Encouraging your child to look after themselves from an early age is one of the most important skills a parent can teach. But at what stage do you expect a child to be self-sufficient? The answer is younger than you'd think. Children are capable of much more than we give them credit for. Getting a snack if they're hungry, packing their lunch box for daycare or school, tidying up their room, choosing appropriate clothes, organising their backpack and carrying it themselves. A child of three is able to do all of these things. Yes, three!

So where do you start if your child hasn't yet mastered these life skills? It's a good idea to begin with just one skill, such as packing their own school lunch box. You'll need to set some guidelines for what is to go in the lunch box – maybe a popper, piece of fruit, pre-packaged snack and sandwich for lunch. It's a good opportunity to talk about healthy eating and the types of food their body needs. The emphasis should be on healthy food with treats saved for once a week.

Explain to your child it is now their responsibility to pack their own lunch box and do a few trial runs. The food should be placed in the fridge or pantry in a place they can access without your assistance. Praise your child when they are doing a great job and give gentle guidance if they need some direction with food choices. When the job is complete, a big smile and a comment on their accomplishment will go far in making them feel good about their contribution.

When you first try this you may encounter some resistance as you are changing the rules of the game. Be persistent and inside two weeks, with continuity and praise, your child will be packing their own lunch box. You will also be pleasantly surprised at how much they enjoy doing it!