

Bathing our Babies

A poignant memory from my days of teaching kindergarten includes a timid girl who came to school each day with a clearly detectable odor. Already at five, the other children chose to avoid her, aware of the awful smell. A very young teacher myself, I had no idea how to broach the subject of bathing with her parents.

Through the years I have grown to understand that bathing our children has meaning far beyond soap and water. Bathing a child impacts her in significant ways.

First, bathing simply feels good. Water is a stress reliever, and all of us sleep better when we are blessed with its renewing powers. Stepping into bath water when the temperature is “just right” is a sensual treat.

Baths are educational. Floating and splashing and pouring teach early lessons in physics. Children learn that their bodies move differently in the water. Even young infants learn the power of kicking and splashing when they are lowered into a small tub. They experience the phenomenon of cause and effect as their parents react to a faceful of bathwater.

Bathing washes away the detritus of the day. Grape koolaid on the chin? Gone! Marker remnants on the hands? Erased! That sweaty neck ring from playing outside? Washed away! In a few moments, a bath removes the day’s physical history. We are newly pure, our bodies a clean slate.

But perhaps the most important lesson children learn from being bathed is about their own worth. When parents patiently wash arms and legs and shampoo hair, children learn that their bodies are valuable and worthy of respect. Parents begin to set the stage for teaching their children self care. They teach children to honor their own bodies.

And the sweetest point of all—children fresh from the bath are irresistibly lovable. Adults are compelled to smell their sweet heads and cuddle their warm, soft, pajama-clad bodies. This tender union at the end of the day is just the blessing a child needs to send him off to a comforted sleep. And just the closure a parent needs to be able to face another day of koolaid and markers tomorrow.

When I remember the little girl who smelled, I grieve for her even now. Not just for the social rejection she experienced at the hands of her peers, but more for the lack of self-respect I saw in her even then. She missed out on the cherishing care of her parents. I fear that she never knew how precious she really was.

No parent wants to raise a child who is too full of himself, but instilling a sense of worth is critical to raising healthy children. And parents do this beautifully, quietly, in the daily care of their children.

Who would think that a little soap and water could go so far?

