



# The Dandelion Experience<sup>1</sup>

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**D**andelions. Buckets and buckets of dandelions dug one by one were transformed into Danny's first bicycle. A spring and summer project in the early years of our son's life provided some basic lessons in the worth of work. He wanted a bicycle and we wanted him to have one, but we felt that he was now old enough to take a direct part in its purchase.

Helping with chores around the house and sharing in family responsibilities were already understood and accepted. Even earlier in life, Danny had seen that everyone needs to pull together to make a strong family. Now it was time to learn the lessons of economics on a larger scale and especially the outside-the-family values of work.

The dandelion project was agreed upon. We recognized that the amount of sustained effort needed to keep ahead of the little yellow rascals was more than would be reasonable to expect of a six-year-old on a "family chores" basis. So we offered the job as a season-long opportunity to make enough money for the much-wanted bicycle. The wages were based on a system in which Danny could easily account for himself, one penny for each two plants (with roots.) He was paid whenever he wanted, dumping out his little bucket and counting the dandelion plants with Mother—and her purse—standing by. Three basic lessons about the worth of work were taught that summer. Although today's rates for dandelions and for rebuilt red bicycles are somewhat higher than they were then, the need for children to learn these basic lessons is still the same!

## Lesson 1: Effort Counts

"Self-worth" is a popular term today. Everyone needs to feel worthwhile. To be healthy and productive, we all need a sense of value in ourselves and in the worth of our efforts. If no one ever notices what we do, if no one pays any attention to the difference between sincere effort and sloppy workmanship, it can be very depressing. Worse yet, if we don't respect ourselves and if we don't recognize the worth of our efforts—in our own eyes—we can feel useless and frustrated.

The worth of a child's work, both his effort and his product, needs to be recognized. For a small child, "work" is the things he builds, colors, organizes, cleans up, puts away, or any of the thousand things a good parent points out to the child as evidences of the worthwhile outcomes of his time and effort.

Above all else, the young child needs help in identifying and recognizing the things that effort can produce. Encouragement and praise for appropriate activity and its products must be given to this child.

## Lesson 2: Money Converts Effort into Goods and Services

For small children, money is mysterious stuff. Money is what Daddy and Mommy have, or what they keep reminding each other they don't have. Money is what Mommies don't have enough of for chewing gum—even if they have enough for spinach. Strange.

Far worse, children can learn that money comes only when you beg for it or that money is something you can count on: a weekly allowance, for example. Neither of these serves well in real life. Children need to learn early how money fits into the economic system. The important lesson is that

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money represents effort—someone has *worked* for it. This idea should be understood even if the money has been given to the child. But the relationship of money to effort will never be fully appreciated until the child sees his or her own efforts converted to money.

Children also need to learn that money is to use, not just to be an end in itself. The urge to collect and to hoard should be played out on rocks, bottle caps, and stamps. While there is nothing wrong with an organized coin collection, the child who is taught only *save* money is being shortchanged.

Danny needed to watch his summer-long efforts being converted into money that added up to the worth of the bicycle. His bike, like any goal of the working-earning-saving-spending cycle, needed to be close enough that he could keep it all together in his six-year-old mind. Money's value is best seen as a conversion between efforts and the meeting of needs. This lesson helps us understand the warning: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

### **Lesson 3: Work Relates People to One Another**

Danny needed a bicycle. His mother needed the dandelions removed from the lawn. The decision about the worth of dug dandelions was Mother's; the decision about the worth of the bicycle was Danny's. When these two decisions about needs could be fitted together, the result was one of the basic social relationships of an orderly society: buying-selling, hiring-laboring. Each of these processes is honorable when carried out in an honest and non-abusive way. Danny couldn't be expected at age six to understand the whole process or to identify the values it represented, but he could experience it—get a taste of it, we might say. Such experiences are the building-blocks of a value-based life. "Train up a child in the way he should go . . ." (Proverbs 22:6) includes these basic lessons about work and the experiences that make them real to the child. It is the adult's responsibility to provide them and to help the children learn to talk about the values they represent.