

Initiative

Tanya O'Rourke

Below is the piece that I shared with all of you last April when we first spoke about Initiative as a school. We will be embracing the practice of Initiative again at East Ridge, this time for the months of March and April. What I wrote below still applies, but I did want to add, how many examples of great initiative I have seen from so many students over the last two afternoons while volunteering for the school's play practice. It's go-time for the play, and the incredible people involved are once again committed to putting on a great show despite the recent attempts by the weather to unravel the entire thing. Everyone is really pulling together, in order to pull-off, yet another fantastic East Ridge production and the students are great examples of this. For each of the days that I have helped I have seen students demonstrate great initiative. I have seen students carefully select who they choose to sit and stand next to so that they can successfully pay attention and remain quiet when necessary. I have seen them do this, despite the fact, that some of those social situations they are intentionally avoiding seem like so much fun! I have seen students take the initiative to encourage others to be quiet and to show respect for the many volunteers in the room with them. I have seen them take turns, I have seen them wait patiently for their costume fittings and I have seen them be kind and helpful to one another. And they've done all of this while being hungry, tired, excited and irritated – yes, it's possible, all of these things can happen at the same time! Initiative can be a difficult thing to teach but I want to reassure you that you and teachers are doing it! Our East Ridge kiddos are getting it. They are getting the practice they need at school and at home too. And for those of you looking for more ideas and ways to practice I hope that you can start by acknowledging the little things, the small ways that our kids are skill building, each and every day, and encourage them to continue to do these things even when they are hard!

Initiative Continued

Initiative is relatively easy to define but harder to explain, especially to kids. It's the ability to see and then do what needs to be done before being asked. People who have initiative might be described as self-starters, as resourceful and capable. Giving kids the opportunity to acquire this skill is super important because it is linked to success at school and to long term success overall. Furthermore, it's incredibly timely in the see something say something school climate that we are currently embracing. Like all of the important skills we have learned about this year initiative is learned through practice.

1. Let *them* do it!

I'm pretty much a type A personality. I let my kids decorate the Christmas tree on their own but then I move things around to create symmetry when they're not looking. They all make their own beds in the morning and have

for quite a long time, but I have been known to flatten out a little wrinkle or fluff a pillow once they leave for school. It's hard for me to let them do things because I frankly prefer the way that I do them myself but that's not going to help them in the long run. My kids are tasked with doing many things themselves because it's the most salient way for them to learn that those things need to be done. My kids never had appreciation for how messy the shoe closet gets before they had to clean it themselves. Now, each of them takes more initiative in maintaining it because if they end up drawing the short straw on that chore they want it to be easier. The same is true for their relationship with the toilets in the house ☐ ☐

2. Make solving the problem accessible – ROUTINES.

Kids have a hard time seeing what we see. It's true, sometimes they see their laundry lying all over the floor and they ignore it, but for the most part, depending on where they are in age and development, they haven't mastered the executive functioning skills that allow them to manage multiple organizational tasks at one time. They become very focused on single items and it can be a bit tricky for them to add things on without our helpful reminders. Routines can help with this. Having the practice of doing the same thing around the same time everyday can help a child develop initiative in doing the task outside of those times. Sunday mornings are TV/Gaming mornings. We don't do a lot of TV in our house so my youngest REALLY looks forward to Sundays. The routine is always the same. If her room is clean, her homework is completed, checked and in her backpack ready for Monday she can play. This carrot is so big for her that it didn't take long for her to develop the initiative to do all of these things on her own. Now she'll come down and say "my homework is done, Daddy checked it, it's in my backpack, my bed is made and my room is clean. Can I play video games now?"

Sometimes we don't know what our kids can do until the right motivation is in place. For initiative, like so many other skills, the learning is in the doing. High-expectations, followed by praise and concrete support is key. If you want your kids to have the initiative to clean a toilet, it might help to have the cleaning supplies organized and handy ☐ ☐ Or not, I mean, it is still a toilet.

3. Positive Praise and Reflective Questions.

Kids need to feel like they're doing a good job to develop the confidence to do it better. We all do! Allowing them the opportunity to do something, even if they don't do it well, is important for their overall learning but also for their levels of optimism, perseverance and resilience. The idea that they might not have mastered something "yet" is very powerful and also very realistic. They

need to learn that things take time and that the ability to practice something is a skill for the long term. These are also great opportunities to talk about things that are hard. Some jobs are harder than others and being willing to ask them why they think a job is hard and why they think they still need to do it helps them develop in the critical areas of persistence, self-reflection and gratitude and therefore helps them build connections to the bigger picture. Learning to take initiative can also be a great practice in empathy. When I ask my kids "are you done cleaning?" and their answer is "yes." I almost always follow up with "am I going to think it's clean? What am I going to see when I come in the room?" Which is usually followed up with "ok, give me 5 more minutes" or "let me make sure." By now, the big two pretty much get it, but they are 13 and 15 and have been living with me for a long time. The little one is a work in practice.

And the truth is initiative isn't just about school work and chores. A child that practices and develops initiative is more likely to stand up for things that matter to them. They may stand up for another child on the playground, they may go out of their way to welcome a new student. They might hold the door open for someone, or they might pick up trash from the sidewalk. They might also be brave enough to walk away from someone who isn't treating them well. Having the initiative to do the right thing, in a variety of settings, is a skill we want our kids to have and we need to be brave enough to let them try.