

Hiring, Training, and Keeping Good Help in the Aviary

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We have kids lined up for the next ten years wanting to work here on the farm. The method that we use to keep a kid happy and motivated is easy and of great benefit to our aviary and birds and the future of aviculture. The secret lies in the list of chores assigned to the kid and the way that we explain the job. I tell them right up front that I will do all the fun stuff. I am hiring them to do the stuff that no one wants to do. That is why we have to pay someone to do it.

Then I include in their chore list some fun chores – socializing the babies, observing the breeder pairs on TV, researching baby weights in my library and on the internet, and helping name the babies. We work next to them for a while – “I will cut up the fruit while you put one cup of sprouts and Soak&Simmer in each bowl.” We use this time to talk about nutrition and why we feed a variety of foods.

“I will sweep while you hold the dustpan.” This lets us talk about why birds need to be kept clean. We look at the birds while we clean under the flight cages and down the aisles. My presence reassures the birds and introduces them to the child so they are not upset. We observe that not all the food offered in the morning was eaten. We estimate how much each pair has eaten by comparing the waste on the floor and the leftovers in the bowl with what they were fed in the morning. We check pellet bowls and water bottles.

“I will play with the babies in the nursery while you clean their cages.” This is the time to talk about avian development and anatomy. Cockatoo babies have transparent skin and the kids get a big thrill when you show them the baby’s liver and spleen, the GI system and the trachea. We also talk about the importance of socialization.

Communication and working together allows me to set standards without being too bossy or hanging over them. I sprinkle in a few weird facts that they can use to amaze their friends and relatives. All discussion is geared to the age and development of the child, but we don’t talk down to them. I’d rather expand a child’s vocabulary than use baby words. These discussions reinforce the importance of the work. The child is not just sweeping the floor or cleaning cages, he is contributing to the health of the birds and his observations are important. While he cleans he can observe the birds’ behavior and note any changes. He is not just

dishing up the birds’ food, he is helping to provide a balanced diet to exotic creatures.

I have two people now that could come in tomorrow morning and do everything by themselves, except feed babies. One is fourteen years old and the other is his 72-year-old grandfather. Tate and Henry alternate days in the summer so they can both do other stuff at home. The job here does not pay much. I explain that I know that they are worth a lot more – and they are – but that is what I can afford. I have their help from two to five hours most weekdays. With good planning, I get all the heavy lifting and carrying done, all those chores that require more than two hands and most of the yucky chores get done, too.

Some Things That I Have Learned

The safety of the child is the most important part of this arrangement. Never put a child in danger of being injured in any way. If you have a pair of breeder birds that get aggressive, you service those birds until you get a safe feeding station installed for them. If the walk to the bird barn is covered with snow, make his first chore shoveling snow, not carrying water bottles to the bird barn. If the temperature outdoors is going to reach 90°F, schedule outdoor chores early in the day when it is cool and let him work in the air-conditioned nursery when it gets hot. Always make sure that you supply enough liquid to prevent dehydration. Some children must be encouraged to drink enough. Again, check with the parents about diet restrictions before giving anything. For example, my granddaughter Samantha does not tolerate citric acid. Some children are shy about asking for a snack or a drink. One piece of advice a senior manager gave me when I first started hiring engineers: “First thing, you show them where the bathroom is.”

Keep in constant contact with the parents. Explain everything that you expect from the work experience. Make sure that they know how much money you are putting in their child’s hands and when.

Pay everyone at the end of the day on Friday – \$50 a week looks like a lot of money to a kid, \$10 a day does not look like much. Keep careful records of how much time the child has worked. We put a big calendar on the wall and the child signs in every day when he starts work and when he goes home. At the

end of every day, the child should calculate exactly how many hours he has worked that day. Don't forget to subtract for lunch. I have found that if children are paid for lunch, lunch can last two hours. I tell them that if they come up with more hours than they actually worked, I will catch the mistake. If they calculate too few hours, I will gratefully accept all donations. I'm only joking, but it works. This method is guaranteed to increase their math skills. At the end of the week the kid calculates his paycheck. Make sure that parents know exactly how much money you have put into their child's hands. (I know I said this twice. It's important.)

A bonus equal to one or two weeks pay is appropriate at the end of the season or before the child goes on vacation with his family. Make it a big occasion and be sure that he understands that it is a token of your appreciation, not something that he deserves. Inform his parents.

School and family are his most important jobs. I am very firm about this and reinforce it constantly during the school year. Working for me requires excellent grades. Most of our children make the honor role every term. Since the school bus drops him off here in the afternoon, I give the child a few minutes to get a quick snack and a drink, sign in and phone home before he starts work. Home chores are usually done before school in this rural area. I make sure that he gets home at least half an hour before dark, so he can check on his livestock. Every child knows that I can handle the job without him if he needs extra time to study or baby-sit younger children to give his Mom a break.

Praise every hour, especially in the beginning. Never praise effort, only results. Thank him for his work at the end of every day. This will establish good habits in you to always look for the good in the work that the child is doing. Resist the temptation to add "but you missed a spot over there." Praise should not be an excuse to point out a failing.

Set a regular schedule for days and hours to work. Insist that the child call if he is going to be late or he can't come. If he fails to show up for work on time, call his home and find out why. He may have had an accident on the way. Be very flexible in allowing deviations from the schedule, but encourage advance notice.

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No child is going to be a cheerful worker if his entire family has gone to the water park and he's stuck cleaning the chicken coop.

Should any problems occur let the parents know before you discuss it with their child. Have a specific goal in mind before you start the conversation. For example, you are unhappy because tools are not put back where they belong. Chances are, the child knows that he is not performing at an expected level. He probably has a good reason and, if given a chance, will present you with a good solution. Maybe he left the broom in the middle of the aisle to remind himself where to start sweeping next Friday.

Boys at fourteen are not good about finishing things. You have to check up. The hormone surges cause them to forget everything they ever knew. They can start a chore, but they forget what they were doing half way through. The floor is swept, but the pile of peas is left in the middle of the floor. Don't get mad. They can't help it and you can't fix it. After a thousand reminders and several years, they will do better. They can still do a lot of work, especially if it involves muscular activity and girls are watching. Be careful – boys at this age are still growing and should not be doing a lot of heavy lifting. Too much weight can fuse their long bones too early and they will be short men. You may want to let the fourteen-year-old go play football and hire his younger brother.

Do not try to rehabilitate a child who is on drugs. Choose your workers from the group that shares your own value system and who loves animals. Check references. I was warned not to ask school guidance counselors for a list of students looking for work because counselors most often recommend the ones already in severe trouble. They think you might be the child's salvation. You are not. Your job is raising birds and you are already over-worked or you would not be hiring help.

Know Federal and State laws that apply to your situation. I believe that if you pay someone less than \$600 a quarter, you may not have to pay Social Security and withhold Federal Income Taxes, but check with your accountant. There are laws dealing with child labor, too.

Maintain adequate insurance. This is obvious after you think of it.

My experience working with kids and birds has been very positive. I hope this helps make your experience an enjoyable one, too. ♦