



Fostering Independence in Children: Tips for Parents

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One of the central goals of parenting is to help children develop into well-adjusted, independent adults. By the time children reach the age of late adolescence or early adulthood, we want them to be able to make good decisions on their own, take responsibility for their decisions, and act wisely in their personal, social, academic, and professional lives.

To foster independence, it is important for adults to provide a supportive environment for children and to recognize learning opportunities when they present themselves. Parents naturally seek to protect and nurture their children as they learn and grow. Wise parents also strive to guide their children from a state of dependence in infancy to independence in adulthood.

The desire for independence, and what independence means, is often affected by cultural and family values. Western cultures (such as those in North America and Europe) tend to be characterized by individualism and independence, while other cultures (such as those in Asia or Latin America) tend to be more collectivistic, or group-oriented. What one culture considers a desirable act or behavior (for example, making decisions independent of parents) may be undesirable or disrespectful in another.

What independence looks like may vary greatly in different cultures, particularly as children enter adolescence and young adulthood, but almost all parents recognize the importance of being able to act independently as an aspect of healthy personality development.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENCE

Becoming an independent person is a developmental process, with many changes occurring over time. Parents and caregivers can provide critical support for their children in the journey toward independence throughout the various stages of childhood. Independence will look different depending on the age of the child. Recognizing these differences is helpful as we walk the fine line between encouraging dependency and fostering independent behavior.

Infants. In the first few years of life, infants are totally dependent on their parents. They rely on their parents or other caregivers to meet even their most basic needs such as safety and food.

Early childhood. As children move through early childhood (2-6 years), a number of opportunities for encouraging independence emerge. Children at this age eagerly seek to perform various tasks. They may demonstrate their developing independence by taking more responsibility for self-care (for example, getting dressed and brushing teeth) and helping out with household chores. As children begin to recognize they are able to complete tasks on their own, the foundation for independence is established. Although parents, caregivers, and the community all provide important structure and support during this time, children, if given the opportunity and support, begin to take more responsibility for themselves.

School-age. As children move into the school years, they are faced with a variety of challenges that require independence, such as going to school for the first time, making decisions, and regulating their own behavior. These demands continue to grow as they move into middle school and adolescence. As a parent, you can help by encouraging your child in his or her growing independence. You may be tempted to complete tasks or make decisions for your child to save time. Instead, step back and allow your child the opportunity to gain experience in independence.

HOW PARENTS CAN SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

Parents and caregivers can help children develop a sense of independence. Below are some tips to try.

In the early years, allow children to complete simple tasks on their own. As any parent of a toddler has experienced, young children are eager to try new things and demonstrate their ability to complete a task. Whether pouring their milk, stirring the cake mix, or putting on their shoes, children love doing things on their own.

Encourage children as they take initiative to do things for themselves. Although there will be times when you need to prevent your child from doing certain activities (for example, when something is dangerous or just isn't appropriate for a young child), it is generally good to allow him or her to try to complete tasks independently. Be careful of fostering dependency at this age by always trying to do things for your child.

Recognize that not being able to do something independently can be frustrating. Most of us experience frustration at times when trying to accomplish new things. Children are no different and may become frustrated when trying something for the first time. For example, dressing oneself is an important skill for young children to learn, but it takes time and practice to learn how to snap buttons or pull up zippers. For older children, keeping a planner for homework and other assignments is a challenging task that may be difficult at first, but it is one they must learn to be successful in school and eventually in the workplace.

Encourage children to master new skills by praising their efforts and offering appropriate support when needed. Help them work through their feelings of frustration by listening and helping them see their potential for learning to master the skill. Continue to provide them with opportunities to practice so that they can move toward independence.

Help children develop self-efficacy by experiencing success in completing tasks by themselves. Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs that children have about their ability to complete specific tasks. For example, children who don't believe they are capable of completing a multiplication problem have low self-efficacy for that task. This belief can have a significant impact on how hard they try and may even prevent them from trying at all.

We help children develop self-efficacy by allowing them to experience success in various activities called *mastery experiences*. This naturally gives them the confidence needed to face similar challenges in the future. One of the best ways to promote self-efficacy is to give children challenging tasks to complete. Most children are motivated by a challenge, and encouraging

them to take on new challenges invites them to experience the intrinsic reward of mastering a new skill.

Allow children to make their own decisions when appropriate. As children develop a sense of responsibility and the ability to think for themselves, it is important to gradually allow them to make more of their own decisions. As children move from early childhood to adolescence, they will be faced with a rapidly increasing number of decisions, ranging from what activities to pursue, to what friends to hang out with, to what classes to take. Providing children with opportunities to practice making decisions while young will help them develop a sense of independence and the ability to make good decisions later in life.

SUMMARY

Parents and caregivers play an essential role in helping children develop the skills that will eventually allow them to function in the world as self-sufficient adults. When considering what learning opportunities to provide for children as they grow, it is useful to view independence as a natural progression. Adults can foster independence by offering both support and challenge when needed, depending on each individual child's abilities and developmental stage.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/PositiveParenting>

Provides helpful tips for positive parenting at a variety of childhood stages, including the preschool years, early and middle childhood, and adolescence.

National Association for the Education of Young Children, *I can do it myself, early learning years*: <http://www.naeyc.org/ece/1997/27.asp>

Includes an article on fostering independence in young children and other helpful information on raising young children.

Stipek, D., & Seal, K. (2001). *Motivated minds: Raising children to love learning*. New York: Holt.

Discusses the role of autonomy (independence) and its importance in developing self-directed learners. Includes a number of helpful tips for parents.

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