



Fostering Independence: Tips for Parents

Many parents struggle with the issue of how much independence to foster in their child. Dependency can interfere with the development of skills and confidence necessary for decision making. Dependency can also delay social development, causing children to have problems in their relationships with adults and other children. Children and parents can both benefit when developmentally appropriate independence is cultivated.

It can be a common pitfall for busy parents to complete tasks that their child is responsible for and is capable of completing. Though it may actually take more time initially for the parents to require the child to do age-appropriate tasks, the child's self confidence and independence will flourish as a result. Specific strategies can encourage independence in children:

- Encourage independence in activities. Your child's attempts to get others to do tasks for which he or she is responsible should be ignored, while praise and encouragement should promptly be given for any attempt made to complete tasks independently. Let the child know that you are proud of their willingness to take these risks, and give them enough support to promote success. Provide opportunities for your child to grow in areas that require familiar skills before venturing into more difficult or less familiar areas, such as kindergarten.
- Establish consistency. Open communication and clear boundaries will help your child develop confidence in decision making. A consistent plan of action helps your child to develop self-reliance.
- Encourage decision-making and problem solving. Give your child freedom to choose between two acceptable choices. Fear of criticism or failure is removed when both choices are acceptable. Gradually extend the choices as your child becomes more confident. Problem solving is learned by solving problems.
- Encourage self-reliance. Teaching your child to clean a room, make a bed, or fold or hang clothes requires time and effort. However, these responsibilities produce confidence and independence. Avoid doing for your child what they are capable of doing for themselves. Gear expectations to your child's age and development. Several valuable skills for your child to practice before coming to kindergarten are:
 - Learn to manipulate snaps, buttons and zippers on clothes. 
 - Practice taking care of personal possessions; hanging up a coat and putting belongings away.
 - Establish self-sufficiency for bathroom needs and practice healthy behaviors.
 - A larger backpack is best for folders and things your child will pack daily. Practice zipping and unzipping the bag as well as getting things in and out of the backpack. 
 - Practice getting items in and out of a lunchbox and opening containers, packages and zipper bags.
 - Have your child spend small amounts of time with another adult with either parent present. A good choice would be an adult outside of the family or a parental best friend; someone they are familiar with. It will help your child separate from you more easily.
- Nurture self-confidence. Independence is developed one step at a time by patient support and praise. Respect the uniqueness of your child, and let him or her know you care. Your interest in his or her activities, conversation and opinions will encourage new efforts. Your confidence in your child's abilities will eventually nurture self-confidence and independence.