



Encouraging Independence in Young Children

From an early age, a child's search for independence is fueled by the desire to make things happen and to feel competent. A young child's opinion about her capabilities is, to a large extent, based on her parent's or caregiver's response to her. As an adult, your role in fostering independence is to provide love and support, encourage exploration and curiosity, teach skills, and allow the child to make appropriate choices. Your enthusiasm for a child's exploration sends a message that these activities are valued by you.

Sometimes the desire to make things happen takes young children down paths that require limit setting, or they may become frustrated while trying to master a certain task. While it is appropriate to allow for small doses of frustration, caregivers should be prepared to step in to prevent overwhelming frustration, and also to expect mistakes. The key is to provide an emotional safety net when trial and error results in more error than immediate success.

Like other developmental milestones for young children, successful accomplishment of self-care tasks are age-specific. An infant's efforts to lift his head, roll over, or sit up are significant steps toward independence. Love, affection, and nurturing will help him reach that goal.

A safe environment is paramount once children are mobile. Curious and daring toddlers have little or no judgement concerning their safety, so it's up to you to ensure that they can explore and experiment in safe surroundings. Independence at this stage can be encouraged by giving the child small choices as a way to exercise a measure of control over his life. These choices might include which story to read, song to sing, or which shirt to wear.

Preschoolers are verbally capable of expressing many thoughts, feelings and needs, and they are ready to take bigger steps toward independence. Encourage preschool children to do for themselves on a daily basis by allowing them to put away clothes and toys, for example. Establishing family chores--setting the table, folding towels, or helping with meal preparation--builds a sense of competence and teaches children how to do for others.

Once children reach school age, there are many opportunities to facilitate independence. Decisions about friends, school projects, and play are all a part of their daily life choices. Financial decision-making skills can be bolstered by giving older children responsibility with money, for example providing an allowance or designating a child as class treasurer. Although it is necessary to establish limits and maintain firm rules about important issues, it is equally important to honor children's choices whenever possible. By showing your genuine enthusiasm and recognizing the many small tasks a young child accomplishes, you are helping her gain control over her world and preparing her for a healthy, independent life.

