

Supporting Your Child's Gradual Development of Healthy Independence: Putting Yourself Out of a Job!

Many children are eager to try things by themselves – even before they're ready – while other kids are hesitant to step out on their own. Whatever your child's personality, there are steps you can take at every age that will help your child develop a healthy sense of independence, grounded in experiences of mastery and competence.

I. Why is it so important to focus on this issue, whether your child is tot or a teen?

- Before a child can develop healthy independence, he or she needs to learn that you are there as a secure base. A healthy attachment precedes healthy independence.
- At certain ages (e.g. toddler period, early adolescence), children's striving for independence becomes their major thrust. If they don't find healthy outlets for making choices and doing things on their own, they use negative behaviors to demand independence.
- The challenge for parents is to avoid doing everything for the child, instead providing "just enough" help and support that the child feels he or she has accomplished the task. It's a matter of finding the right balance between holding on and letting go – keeping our eye on the longterm goal of "putting ourselves out of a job," helping our child build the skills and confidence to eventually navigate adult life.

II. Tips for parents

- Engage children in real work, letting them contribute according to their age
- Break new tasks down into "chewable chunks"
For example, with complex tasks, allow a young child to do the last step. Gradually encourage the child to do more steps in the task until he or she can do it independently.
- Recognize each small success and effort
Be specific and focus on the child's satisfaction in the accomplishment. For example:
 - *"You got yourself dressed for school and brushed your teeth without being reminded. You must feel good about that!"*
 - *"You worked hard on filling out that application for a summer job. I bet it's a relief to have that done. Shall I proofread it with you before you send it in?"*
 - *"You two were not happy about sharing those Legos, but you figured out a way to resolve the problem and I didn't even need to help!"*
- Keep a light attitude about mistakes (including your own!)
"That was a good first try at doing your own laundry. It looks like you'll need to sort things a little more carefully next time so that red shirt doesn't turn your white underwear pink. I remember doing that when I was first starting to do my own laundry. What a mess I made!"