

Teaching Children Responsibility and Independence

A Handout from the Center for Effective Parenting

Children start the drive toward independence at an early age. Some parents, accustomed to meeting all of their children's needs, are reluctant to give in to their children's demands for independence. However, this is the time for parents to find the balance between letting their children begin to do things for themselves and providing their children with the support and guidance they need. With this increasing independence comes the ability for children to understand the concept of responsibility.



Here are some things parents can do to foster responsibility and independence in their children.

Let your children do things for themselves. Even very young children begin to show an interest in doing things independently. Let your children do things for themselves as they express a desire to do so. Focus on effort, avoid being critical of the end product, and praise them for doing things on their own. As children grow and mature, they will naturally want to do more.



Let your children help with challenging tasks. Encourage your children to try to do new things and to face new challenges. This will certainly boost children's sense of competence. Be careful to choose tasks that their children are able to accomplish.

Encourage your children to make decisions. Start encouraging decision-making while your children are young. At first, choices should be kept simple, like allowing children to choose what to wear out of two outfits. As your children get older, encourage them to make more complex decisions. Children learn to make good choices by being given choices.

Learn to model responsibility and independence. Children learn by watching their parents. One of the best ways for parents to teach their children to behave responsibly and independently is by displaying those behaviors themselves. Let your children see you making decisions without wavering and taking care of responsibilities in an appropriate manner.



Help and encourage your children to solve their own problems. Starting when they are young, teach your children problem-solving strategies. Encourage your children to come up with their own solution to their problems. The ability to problem solve is a skill that will be useful throughout their lives. It will also aid in the development of confidence and independence.



Encourage your children to take risks. Taking risks involves facing potential failure. Many parents try to shield their children from the disappointment of failure. Such parents may be doing their children a disservice. Children need to take risks to grow and they must experience failure in order to learn how to cope with it.

Be there to provide support, when needed. Even the most independent-minded children need to lean on their parents from time to time. Be available to your children and provide support when needed. Children who know their parents will be there when they need them will have the confidence needed to explore the world.

Provide adequate discipline. Appropriate discipline provides the structure children need in their lives to feel secure. Children need to know what to expect from their parents and what their parents expect from them. Consistent discipline helps children learn about what's expected of them. Children who know what to expect feel more in control of their lives and are thus more likely to behave in responsible and independent ways.

Praise your children. When your children display responsible and independent behavior, show them you notice and appreciate their efforts by providing them with lots of praise.

Give your children responsibilities. Most children want to help their parents and to feel needed. One of the best ways for children to learn how to behave responsibly is to be given responsibilities, such as chores. Make sure that the assigned chores match your children's capabilities. Take the time to show your children how to do their assigned tasks the correct way. Keep in mind, though, that how well your children perform a task is not as important as what they are learning about responsibility.



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