

Help Me Help Myself: Understanding Your Young Child's Need for Independence

By Catherine Dorner

What is the best way to promote your child's self esteem and confidence?

Start fostering your child's natural desire to be independent and watch their self esteem grow. Children who are encouraged to carry out independent activities learn, as neural child psychologist, Stephen Hughes would say, to be "good at doing things."

When a child invests the effort to tie their shoe or sweep the floor, they are engaged in meaningful tasks that require a level of persistence and encourage their natural desire to master those skills. Not only is a child learning self reliance, she is building a foundation for her success in life. As parents foster their child's independence they are empowering their children to better manage frustrations or setbacks, understand how to find solutions to their problems and approach life with a higher level of creativity. All the skills necessary for a successful life!

Often parents feel that using praise and constant encouragement is the best way to build their child's self esteem, but, when parents let their child explore their own independence, practice trial and error as their guide, research has shown that it is more effective than praise.

When a parent cultivates their child's independence, they are offering affirmations of trust and confidence. When a child explores their own independence, they begin saying to themselves, "I believe in me!" "I am doing things that are important and I am getting good at doing them." Children are no longer dependent on outside praise, they feel their self worth from the inside.

Parents may find this hard at first, not to jump in and help their child when they are struggling for various reasons.. However, when parents see their children happily accomplishing independent activities that allow them to zip their own jacket and or make their own sandwich, fostering independence will feel like a natural part of the parenting process.

Things for parents to keep in mind as children develop independence:

- Allow the child to do as much as he/she can, help only when needed.

- Give your child access to these activities to your comfort level. As your child becomes more independent, the more you as a parent will feel comfortable showing him/her new life skills.
- Look around the house and ask yourself, “What am I doing for my child that he or she can do themselves? How can I include my child into the routine of our daily life?”
- Expect a learning curve – a child may at first be messy, make mistakes, feel frustrated, have a short attention span, forget to put things away etc. Consider independence a process and not a product.
- Learn to know when to invite your child to do things and when to stand by a rule. If you have family rules about certain things like cleaning a room before bed that is a limit and you would have an expectation that the child would do this. Don't, however, expect the child to do **all** of these activities as a requirement. Leave room for choice. Allow your child to do most of these activities in a spontaneous way. Let him or her choose to do many of these activities. Some of them they may enjoy, some maybe not as much.
- Leave room for the child to repeat these activities until they feel a sense of satisfaction. Allow your child time to explore their independence.

Suggested ways for parents to implement more independence in the home:

These activities allow children to make a contribution to family life, allow them the opportunity to learn independence, develop their gross motor and fine motor skills, reach a level of mastery and self control, cultivate a higher level of concentration and build their self esteem through a feeling of competency. Parents can show their young child the basic steps in each activity as a lesson. If the child is overwhelmed with the activity, they may not be ready. If it is too easy, they probably could have done it earlier.

- Sweep the floors, crumb the table (Lightweight little broom, small brush and dustpan, paintbrush for crumbs on table)
- Wipe the table, floor, stool, walls.... (little bucket with water, sponge and cloth)
- Scrub a sink (add to bucket and sponge a little scrub brush with baking soda and stool)
- Wash, dry, stack dishes (need a stool to reach the sink and cupboards)
- Dust and polish the furniture (feather duster, a little bit of olive oil, cotton ball and flannel cloth)
- Water and care for indoor and outdoor plants (bucket, vase and scissors to collect flowers, cotton ball and cloth to wash leaves of plants)

- Wash the windows (spray bottle with water, squeegee and cloth)
- Make the beds
- Caring for animals (feeding, grooming, exercising)
- Make own snacks - pouring milk, squeezing orange juice, slicing bananas, shelling nuts, spreading on crackers and bread, little sandwiches (have on hand – stool, spreading knife, small pitcher, a few little bowls and trays, cutting mat in a place where child can access it)
- Role playing games to learn social and emotional independence skills
- Put things away (help child to organize in bins and rotate toys)
- Sort and fold the laundry (towels and napkins are a great place to start, match and roll socks)
- Make own snack and pour own drinks
- Care for themselves (brushing hair, teeth, baths)
- Dressing (right challenge clothing, lessons on zipping, buttoning and tying)

Things to have around the house to enable children’s independence:

These things could be kept in a closet, shelf, drawer, bin or some other place that is accessible to the child, convenient and comfortable for the parent.

For care of the household environment: Bucket, drying cloths, sponge, scrub brush, dust pan, spray bottle, access to water

For food preparation: Spreader, bread knife (a sharper knife could be added later when the child has gained the skill and self control to use it properly) small pitcher for easy pouring, little bowls and plates to put snack on, little crumb brush and sponge and cloth for sweeping crumbs and wiping spills.

For self care: Access to mirror, tissue, brush or comb, stool to reach bathroom sink

Be creative. Have fun with this!
It should be a win-win for both parent and child.

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