

The Relationship of Responsibility and Independence to the Total Development of the Child

Submitted by Jeffrey Friedman

“The desire to act alone we call independence or personal freedom because when it develops, it enables the child to take care of his own needs. Freedom is a personal conquest of independence, something that one arrives at by one’s efforts – and that effort brings with it uplift, joy, enthusiasm, and great progress!”

~Dr. Maria Montessori

The task of the child is to construct himself - a person oriented to his environment, and adapted to his particular time, place and culture. The child who makes these arrivals becomes a functioning member of society, is comfortable with himself and comprehends the role of humanity.

As adults, our job is to provide the child with the physical and psychic aids that are needed for this development. From birth the progression of the human being is a thrust toward independence through successive physical and psychic accomplishments. This leads us to recognize the extreme importance of the development of independence.

By the age of 2 the child has reached the level of development where he can declare his own needs, as opposed to earlier dependence on others and their interpretation of his needs. He can move around with relative independence in his environment. This is the time we need to start giving the child the opportunity to learn the skills which will enable him to operate with greater and greater independent action. As the child moves from one level of competency to the next, he achieves more and more freedom.

In the Montessori classroom the environment is prepared with care to lead the child through successive levels of independence. Great care is given also to free the child from any unnecessary help from the adult. After work has been introduced the child may work with material on his own, thereby working for his own formation, his own progress - not for others.

The child uses this independence to listen to an inner guide that directs her to actions that are useful to the development of her intellect. These inner guides or forces affect her choices. If someone usurps the functioning of this guide, there is a block in the development of will and concentration. Full personality development is totally dependent on progressive release from external direction and reliance.

Human beings are beings of reason and will; therefore, the final end of independence or, rather, the ‘beginning’ of true independence is the independence of intellect. Dr. Montessori also saw the inter-relatedness of intellectual independence and its physical and social counterparts. She found that social development “developed spontaneously as the child’s intelligence became established through his interaction with the prepared environment.”

This independence and initiative can be encouraged at home by allowing your child to be a functioning part of your family. You can do this by giving your young child real responsibilities and tasks just as other family members have. It must be real work, not pretend work with toys that imitate household tasks. The young child given these responsibilities also develops a respect for the environment not seen otherwise.

Below is a list of possible and reasonable responsibilities for different age groups. At any age it is important to discuss these responsibilities with the child and allow choices when appropriate.

Home Responsibilities for a 2 and 3 year old

- Pick up unused toys and put them in the proper place
- Put books and magazines in a rack
- Sweep the floor
- Place napkins, plates and silverware on the table
- Clean up what they drop after eating
- Given a choice of two foods for breakfast. Learning to make simple decisions - Clear own place at the table. Put dishes on the counter after cleaning the leftovers on the plate
- Toilet training
- Simple hygiene: brush teeth wash and dry hands and face, brush hair, undress and dress self with some help
- Wipe up own accidents
- Carry the boxed or canned goods from the grocery bags to the proper shelf.
- Put some things away on a lower shelf.

Home Responsibilities for a 4 year old

- Setting the table- with good dishes too
- Help make beds and vacuum
- Help dust the furniture
- Hold hand mixer to whip potatoes or mix batter
- Share toys with friends (practice courtesy)
- Tell parents whereabouts before going to play
- Play without constant adult supervision and attention
- Hang socks, handkerchiefs and washcloths on a lower line
- Fold laundry
- Polish silver
- Polish car
- Prepare lunch for school

Home Responsibilities for a 5 year old

- Help with meal planning and grocery shopping
- Make own sandwich or simple breakfast and clean up
- Pour own drink
- Tear up lettuce or a salad
- Make bed and clean own room
- Dress self and choose outfit for the day
- Scrub the sink, toilet and bathtub
- Clean mirrors and windows
- Separate laundry into piles of whites and colors
- Fold clean clothes and put them away

- Yard work
- Paying for small purchases
- Help clean out the car
- Feeding pets and cleaning the living area
- Learn to tie shoes

Home Responsibilities for a 6 year old

- Choose own clothes for the day according to the weather or a special event
- Shake rugs
- Water plants and flowers
- Peel vegetables
- Cook simple food (hot dog, toast)
- Prepare own school lunch
- Help hang clothes on a line
- Hang up own clothes in the closet
- Gather wood for the fireplace
- Rake leaves and weeds
- Take pet for a walk
- Tie own shoes
- Be responsible for own minor injuries
- Keep garbage can container clean
- Clean out inside of car
- Straighten or clean out silverware drawer

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