

# Fostering Independence

Laurie Adams

Vancouver Montessori School  
Honeysuckle Toddler Community

## Why Independence?

Children have an innate drive toward independence. “Help me to do it myself!” Their mission as children is to acquire all of the skills needed to become an adult—like mom and dad (and of course, along the way be loved, happy, healthy, and have a fun-filled childhood). Independence isn’t something we give to children all at once. We must nurture and facilitate it at the many developmental stages throughout childhood. Achieving independence is the nature of the child’s development.

## Separation from Parent

During infancy, parents meet their baby’s needs of total dependency. Once the baby begins crawling, his/her dependency needs change. “When we know the baby is safe in another room of the house, we can allow her to have several minutes there out of our sight. As we go about our work, we can talk to our baby from the next room and reassure her of our presence if she calls for us. If we do this gradually—at first just a few minutes at a time—the baby learns that she can manage without us for brief periods. We lay a foundation for an understanding, so important in a healthy adjustment to life, that physical presence is not essential to trust and a feeling of oneness with loved ones.” Taken from *Montessori from the Start*, by Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen. When a child has this basic emotional foundation of trust and security, they can more freely explore and begin developing a strong sense of independence.

## How is Independence Hindered?

A child’s sense of independence can be hindered in a variety of ways. For many adults, “doing things for our children” is associated with loving them. In many families, both parents are working. It can seem more efficient to dress the child, clean up after him, and have fewer expectations of him. Doing too much for children is a challenging frame of mind to change. Following are some examples of how we unintentionally hinder our child’s developing independence.

- Doing too much for the child when developmentally they are capable.
- Speaking for the child.
- Not inviting verbal or physical collaboration.
- Not showing the child how to do things (put own pants on, sweep the floor, pour milk).
- Not allowing the child time to develop their skills/coordination and doing it for them.
- Not having an environment that promotes their growing capabilities.
- Not setting appropriate limits, boundaries and expectations for behavior.

## Child-Proofed Home

When all areas of your home that your child has access to are safe, parents can feel confident in allowing their child to go to the bathroom on their own, go to their bedroom to play, go to the living room to read a book, and perhaps to the kitchen to get a snack from a low shelf in the fridge. The message this gives a child is very important to their overall confidence, security and independence.

## Child's Environment

The environment that most children live in is furnished and functions efficiently for adults. Children often have their play area, but they must adapt to the rest of the home. To best understand your child's needs, sit on the floor—at your child's height—and consider what hinders or challenges your child? Some things to consider:

- Can your child reach the sink and toilet by his/her self?
- Is the closet clothing rod at his/her shoulder level?
- Are baskets/shelving available to store belongings?
- Is there a small table/chair available for work (drawing, food preparation, playing)?
- When does my child have to wait for me to help them or to get something for him/her?
- Simplify your child's belongings.
  - Which playthings aid your child's development and which ones are simply pacifying?
  - What engages your child's attention?
  - Too many toys are overwhelming for children and adults.

## Care of Self

It is often so much easier and faster to just “do it for the child”. Sometimes this is practical and necessary. However, when we regularly do too much for children, they can become dependent on us to “do it for them”. Their innate need for growing independence and caring for themselves can be stifled. When this happens, they may expect to be taken care of or stubbornly refuse to do things they are otherwise capable of.

In learning to care for themselves, much practice and unstructured time is needed on the child's part. The adult must offer a great deal of patience along with offering just enough assistance for success. Some areas of self-care to consider are:

- Dressing self
- Wiping nose
- Cleaning hands and face before/after eating
- Brushing teeth
- Brushing hair
- Putting clothing in laundry hamper by self
- Folding and putting clean laundry away
- Choosing own clothing—preferably choosing from two outfits laid out by parent
- Packing/unpacking lunch bag
- Wiping up spills
- Using toilet
- Cleaning up after activities
- Clearing place setting after meals
- Preparing food for self

## Clothing

The style and size of clothing makes a tremendous difference in the child's success and frustration levels.

- **Shirts:** pull over t-shirts—not much longer than the waistband; a longer shirt gets in the way of the child finding the waistband—makes pushing down or pulling pants up more difficult—does not promote success for the child.
- **Pants/shorts/short pants:** pants need to have an elastic waistband! The most ideal pants are a lightweight cotton or jersey (sweatpants) fabric. The bottom of the pants should not have ribbing, as this is very frustrating for a child to get over their feet and heels. Children under the age of 6-8 years old cannot often manage buttons, snaps, or belts independently. Shorts/short pants are very helpful to children in the early stages of toileting.
- **Socks and shoes:** socks and shoes are one of the first clothing items children take off and want to put back on. Socks that are too small are very frustrating for children to manage. Ankle socks seem to help children be the most successful. Likewise, shoes that are too form-fitting are too frustrating. Besides pull-on shoes (or boots) shoes with Velcro straps seem to be the most helpful style of shoes for children.
- Clothing items **Not** helpful to young children—especially while they are learning to use the toilet:
  - × Dresses/skirts/tights
  - × pants with ribbing or tight openings at the ankle
  - × onesies (children cannot unfasten/fasten the crotch snaps)
  - × tight socks or very loose socks
  - × over or undersized clothing
  - × clothing with buttons, snaps, or zippers—at least until coordination is good
  - × belts, ribbons or ties at the waist
  - × shoes that are difficult to put on/take off and with laces tied in knots
  - × overalls and jeans

## Meaningful Participation

When children feel their contributions are meaningful, they feel a greater connection to the family.

- How does your child contribute to/with the overall family?
- Is your child encouraged/expected to participate meaningfully in daily chores?
- Is your child encouraged/expected to participate in cleaning up own activities?
- What rituals does your child participate in?
- Is child's perspective/feedback invited and considered?

## Modeling/Language Approach

How you act and how you say things can make a big difference. Young children are always watching and listening—even when you think they are preoccupied. Often, conversations they observe make a bigger overall impression on your child than anything said directly to them. Consider purposefully modeling your own independence while verbally labeling it for your child to overhear. “I am done enjoying my book; I am going to carefully put it away on the shelf now.” “When we get to the curb, I will need to hold your hand” (then follow through: “We are at the curb, would you like to hold my left hand or my right hand.”)

## Discipline Methods/Approach

Giving independence is often confused with letting children be in control and/or do anything and everything they want whenever they want. At VMS, children have the freedom to choose their activities within the limits of lessons the child has received—and they have the freedom to choose their behavior within the confines of socially acceptable limits.

At VMS, we view discipline as an opportunity for learning about limits and boundaries as well as self-management. We tell children what they can do: “You can walk in the classroom”; “I noticed your coat is on the floor— you can hang it on your hook”; “we can wait here in the hallway until you are ready to put your muddy boots on the mat”.

- What method(s) of discipline is used by mom, by dad?
- What is the purpose of discipline to mom, dad?
- Do discipline statements end in a tone of finality or is there room for the child to question/test limits?
- Natural/logical consequences help children be responsible.
- Freedom with limits—adults clearly set and consistently reinforce reasonable expectations and boundaries—the child is free to go about his day within these parameters.
- When the adult is consistent, the child will feel more secure and may not need to continually test boundaries.
- Offering choices helps children feel in control. Offer two choices (that are acceptable to the parent) as much as possible—“would you like a carrot or a peach for your snack?” Would you like to put the blocks away by yourself or would you like me help by picking up the red ones?”

## Routines

Consistent routines promote independence. Children thrive when they can count on/predict the next phase of their day.

## Parent’s Perspective and Expectations

How parents were raised impacts parenting perspectives and expectations.

- Does parent see child as capable or dependent?
- Does parent expect and nurture dependence or independence?
- In all aspects of parenting/child interactions, what message is given regarding independence?

The efforts we make every day to prepare our children are well worth it. Consider your child in the future. What is needed now to help prepare them for when: they are doing homework, driving, going away to college, moving to an apartment, getting married and having children?