

# Encouraging Independence in Young Children



What you can do to help

The earlier we start to encourage children's independence the more likely hood of success. Supporting and encouraging independence can make life easier, happier, and typically smoother if incorporated properly on a daily basis into everyday routines. Sometimes the easiest thing is to do it ourselves, but children learn so much from hands on experiences. As parents we need to remember it may not be done perfectly at first, but we are giving them the opportunity to grow each time they are able to try on their own. Encouraging independence helps develop an important area of the brain that's associated with attention span, problem-solving and mood and body regulation.

The first thing parents and caregivers can do is allow and encourage children to take responsibility for themselves whenever possible. It can be faster and less messy to do the task for them, but they learn much more by doing things by themselves. When children practice self-help skills like feeding and dressing they practice using their small and large motor skills and gain confidence to try new things, which in turn builds self-esteem and pride in their independence. Teaching children to do basic tasks can help simplify your workload in the home, but the real benefit is for the child. The self-confidence boost that children receive from being able and allowed to do tasks for themselves can be remarkable. Children feel a great sense of pride when they master a new skill.

Self-Help skills:

**1. Feeding:**

Encourage children to self-feed when developmentally appropriate. Begin with finger foods then move to fork and spoon, giving children plenty of time to experiment and practice. Give them the tools they need to be successful; for example child size utensils and sticky bowls and plates.

**2. Dressing and Grooming:**

Experts suggest that from 2.5 to 3 years of age children are capable of dressing themselves. Encourage children to dress and undress themselves with assistance only when needed. Pulling socks on and off, pulling up pants after diapering, helping put their arms through

sleeves is a good start. As children begin to grow and become more independent they can work towards zippers and buttons. Allow extra time to complete tasks and be mindful of the age appropriateness of the task.

**3. Hygiene and toileting:**

Be aware of signs of readiness. Encourage young children to get on and off the toilet themselves, pull clothing on and off and wash their hands. Children can begin learning how to brush their teeth after meals and snacks.

**4. Helping with Chores and Tidying:**

Have children help with clean-up early on. Experts say children around 12 months old are able to start learning how to start tidying up toys. Children love to help, they can start with helping put napkins and silverware on the table. When children get involved in regular chores before the age of 4 they tend to be more independent than those who did not experience helping out at home. Keep tools (broom, toy basket etc...) easily accessible so children can access them when needed. Start with a space that is orderly so children are not overwhelmed by the process. For example containers for toys, space on their shelf, if we start with order it makes the task more achievable.

Teaching and promoting self-help skills are worth the time and effort. The secret to success is giving children age appropriate tasks and opportunities for success, while supporting their every effort. Be mindful to start small as they are learning and with a little patience and consistency they will begin to make independent tasks a habit of their own. Remembering to provide ample time to complete the task at hand. First, decide what things are important to you in terms of tasks and overall order, then be consistent and realistic.

Independence is empowering, it's your job to provide age appropriate tasks so children can feel that sense of empowerment.

## How to Get Started:

1. **Get down to their level-** guide your child at first with a gentle hand and allow them time to try on their own.
2. **Easy to follow steps-**break down the steps the first few times, so they are easy to follow. For example start with having them find their own toothbrush and toothpaste, then increase the steps each time you try until the skill is mastered.
3. **Picture schedule-** great idea for younger children. Provide pictures of the steps needed to complete the task.
4. **Be a good role model-**be sure to follow your own instructions and lead by example, your child is always watching. Show your child you value your things and environment.
5. **Offer choices-** offering choices during routines helps to encourage their completion, especially for small children. For example, do you want mint or bubble-gum toothpaste? Do you want to brush your hair with the red or green brush? Simple choices offer independence and will assist in the learning process.
6. **First and Then statements-** first we will clean our room, then we will go to the park. First we will wash our hands, then we will eat. These statements can be very successful with young children.
7. **Use Music-** tidy up songs can make the task at hand FUN and enjoyable and lead to success, which in turn encourages children to be more helpful and compliant.
8. **Offer Positive Reinforcement-** high fives, hugs, tell them how nice they are to help, stickers.
9. **Celebrate Successes-** make a big deal when they complete a task. Always remember to praise and support along the way.
10. **Be realistic and consistent with your expectations-** are the tasks age appropriate?, how are they feeling?, provide boundaries when necessary.
11. **Start when they are young-**if it becomes a routine from an early age it is not such a big deal.

### **Infants (12-18 months)**

- ◆ Help dress and undress
- ◆ Understand and be able to participate in routines
- ◆ Drink from a cup, begin using utensils and eat with fingers
- ◆ Able to make choices and say NO
- ◆ Can understand more than they can communicate
- ◆ Recognize and point to body parts

### **Toddlers (18-36 months)**

- ◆ Able to feed themselves with a spoon
- ◆ Help with cleaning up toys and putting clothes in hamper
- ◆ Work on potty training
- ◆ Able to imitate adults
- ◆ Can participate in hand washing
- ◆ Able to and enjoys participating in tasks

### **Preschoolers (3-4 years)**

- ◆ Understand concepts of not right now, sooner or later
- ◆ Listens and understands more
- ◆ Able to help with daily routines (teeth, cleaning up, dressing and washing)

### **Why it's important to model to children respect for our space and environment and why we value our belongings:**

- ◆ We value and respect our materials and our toys. When we respect something we take care of it. We appreciate it. We look after it. When toys are put away they are less likely to get lost or broken or damaged (or stepped on!).
- ◆ We value our environment and our home. We respect the people we share our environment with. We look after our spaces and ensure they are functional (a bedroom isn't functional if we can't move around it). We respect that others live and work in our environments.
- ◆ We value order. We value being able to find our toys. Ever had a child get frustrated because they can't find a toy and need it now? We like to know

where our toys are and where to find them. We work better when we can find our things!

- ♦ Teaches natural consequences. This is so key! If we pick up our toys our spaces are in order, we have clean work and play areas and we can find our things. Not picking up also teaches natural consequences, if we don't pick up, the place is a mess and there is no clear space. However continually picking up after your child, especially in older children 3 years on, does not teach natural consequences. If parents always clean up after the child, the child only learns that they can make a mess and it will magically be clean the next day.
- ♦ Teaches responsibility. Children can begin to have ownership over their own areas such as their bedroom, especially as the child ages. It is suggested that the child's responsibilities increase with their age. You may not expect a child of three to take responsibility for their mess or area but what about at five, six, seven, at eight? At some stage we need to accept that our children will benefit from taking responsibility for their actions.
- ♦ Children learn good life skills. Tidying, sorting and organising are really good life skills to have. We can help our children by teaching these skills when they are young.

Teaching children independence can be very rewarding and fun for the whole family. It is a wonderful opportunity for families to work together. Make it a fun learning experience. How great is it that as parents we are not only able to guide and support our little ones, but have a front row seat to witness our children growing into independent little people. Have fun and ENJOY!

Remember that adults are a child's best role model.  
Celebrate your child's success!!