



Ways to Foster Independence in Kids

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As humans, one of our most obvious signs of growth is the ability to independently manage ourselves and the environment to achieve our goals. As parents and caregivers too, we become key figures in encouraging this capacity of independence in children and helping them form secure attachments.

In an [earlier article](#), we discussed how to deal with separation anxiety and excessive attachment in kids. And today, let's dive into understanding how children develop independence and how we can foster this process for them so that they learn to manage their emotions and behavior.



Defining Independence: Emotional and Social Self-Regulation

Babies start off as being completely dependent on their caregivers for all their needs. They rely on their caregivers to anticipate these needs before they can learn to communicate them. By consistently being present, caregivers help build the important emotional bond called attachment, due to which children recognize their caregivers, feel secure with them, and depend on them for their needs.

Secure attachment is the ability to form relationships with love and care while respecting healthy boundaries and not getting distressed at every little separation.

As they grow, children learn to communicate their needs, and if everything goes well, they can also tolerate brief absences of their parents. Parallely, they also start learning ways to manage their behavior from their parents, which is the beginning of their capacity for independence.

On the face of it, 'attachment' and 'independence' seem like opposite ideas. However, they are deeply interlinked. Attachment is the strong bond that helps one become an independent person. The concept of 'secure attachment' beautifully brings these two ideas together—it is the ability to form relationships with love and care while respecting healthy boundaries and not getting distressed at every little separation.

Independence is a broad term and can mean several things. For our purpose, I will focus on the capacity to understand and manage ourselves in social and emotional situations. We broadly call this 'self-regulation'.

Supporting Children's Exploration Versus Overcontrolling Parenting

There have been studies to understand how parenting can affect children's ability to regulate themselves. One such study by [Perry et al \(2018\)](#) found that parents may unintentionally hurt the development of independence if they intervene and control situations before children have had a chance to face the challenge on their own.

There is a fine line between protection and over protection.

For instance, if your child is overpossessive of you and struggles to connect with other people, stopping her from being in social situations may seem like a good idea, but will ultimately do more harm than good. Instead, gradually exposing them to situations like

meeting with relatives where they can see you have social bonds with people might help them learn similar behaviors.

Childhood is an exciting time of discovery where children expand their minds, explore their environments, and absorb new learnings. So it is quite natural for parents to be protective. But there is a fine line between protection and over protection.

As caregivers, it can be handy to understand this difference and find the sweet spot where we encourage kids to independently explore while putting safeguards in place.

How Developmental Stages Can Support Parenting

Ages 2-10 are critical for the development of a lot of emotional and social skills in children, which set the stage for self-regulation and the ability to be independent later in life as well.



Each child is different, and their unique personalities plus their stage of development help us understand what we can expect from them, and what might be beyond their capacity right now.

Based on [APA's](#) classification, we can broadly expect the following social skills from kids of various ages. Do remember though, there may be differences in how your child goes through the development stages—in such cases, it is best to consult a professional.

18 to 36 Months

Kids at this age are just beginning to have a strong sense of self—which can make them stubborn and possessive of things and people. They may also be self-centered. Both these things combined mean that they may not yet have the ability to share things and play 'together' with other kids, but they can play side-by-side if we give them separate toys or even mimic other kids' play.

In case of conflict, we can help them by teaching them words to describe how they are feeling and redirecting their attention to other things. Their naturally brief attention spans can help us in this way!

3-5 Years

Socially, these may be the most important years as children learn to understand basic emotions, interpret them through people's expressions, and learn simple social rules - like the fact that their actions have consequences. A child of three may be able to play with 1-2 friends. At four, they start being able to take turns and play with 3-4 friends. At five, they come to enjoy playing with friends.



At this age, it's helpful to encourage children to recognize emotions and express them using facial expressions, words, and art. This is also a good period to foster independence by assigning them small tasks like helping organize groceries, putting away their toys, or passing things on to others. Also, do remember to appreciate their help!

6-10 Years

This is the time when children start to feel complex emotions—like “I like going to school to meet my friends, but I hate homework!” They also relate with other kids now and start getting more independent from their parents. It is also common for kids to be part of same-sex groups at this age.

[At this stage, our role is to nurture the kids' budding independence by helping them learn new hobbies and skills and teaching them to make their own decisions.](#)

Teach them problem solving: help them describe the problem, let them think of possible actions, discuss the pros and cons of each, and encourage them to choose the best action. Help them understand other people's feelings and encourage helpful behavior.

As you can see, children at different ages have different emotional and social skills. Trying to understand the patterns of your child's behavior can help you respond to their needs better and empower them to . Likewise, failure to encourage their independence by instructing their behavior too much or too little can lead them to be closed off or acting out with aggression. By all means, parenting is a collaborative process. How do you nurture your child's independence? Let us know in the comments!

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