

Autonomy and Dependence

One of the things we want for children is for them to become independent. We want them to be able to feed themselves, zip up their own jackets, tie their own shoes, use the bathroom by themselves, keep themselves busy while we prepare dinner, complete their homework on their own, and eventually move out of the house and buy their own health insurance. One of our worries might be that our children will remain too dependent on us and won't fall asleep unless we sit with them, won't be happy to be left with a babysitter, will create a fuss every time we leave them at school, and won't move out of the house and be able to buy their own health insurance. We may worry that other parents will look at our child and think that she is too dependent on her parents.

Independence and autonomy are important goals for children but they aren't simple ones. Independence, when it comes to what we call *self-help skills*, is pretty straightforward; it is really helpful for both children and parents when children are able to dress themselves, feed themselves, take themselves to the bathroom, manage their homework, and when they are able to entertain themselves. But children do live in a world populated by other people and at times their independence will need to accommodate the needs and interests of others. We want our children to be able to work independently in school but they also need to be able to work cooperatively with others on group projects; many adult job situations will require them to work in teams. We want our children to think for themselves, particularly when it comes to resisting the negative influences of peers, but we also want them to be understanding and respectful of the ideas and feelings of other people. Having your own independent ideas and beliefs doesn't mean you can always act on them; having your own way of doing things doesn't mean you always are able to do things your own way.

The issue of a child being too dependent also isn't a simple one. Although we don't want children to be overly dependent on us or on their peers, we do want them to know that they can depend on other people for help when needed. We are happy when our child can go to the library to get the information he needs for the school project. There are children, however, who are unwilling to ask the librarian for

help when they can't find the materials they need. They may spend the time in the library independently but not very productively because they couldn't depend on someone for the assistance they needed. Similarly, we want our children to develop the abilities to independently navigate the emotional and social worlds of friendships and relationships but sometimes the problems and difficulties that arise in those worlds are too big and difficult to deal with on your own. Just like we want them to know that they can depend on the librarian to help them find what they need, we want them to know that they can depend on the responsible adults in their lives to help them find the guidance and support that they need to manage their lives.

In the end, we do want our children to be able to tie their own shoes but we also want them to know that they can come to us when they need help getting that really tight knot out of the laces.

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