

Aiming for Independence

Recently we saw a quote on FB which resonated with our thoughts around the consequences of doing too much for kids and the messages they possibly receive as a result. This Ann Landers' quote is, '**It is not what you do for your children, but what you have taught them to do for themselves, that will make them successful human beings.**'

One of the main aims of parenting is to develop independence in children; to become redundant in terms of doing things for them. What never becomes redundant is the emotional connection with our children. Engaged parenting increases feelings of love, acceptance and belonging, helps to build self confidence, and provides guidance and opportunities to grow.

Where is the line to be drawn between protecting and overprotecting our children?

You will have heard of "Helicopter Parenting" or "Lawn Mowing Parenting" suggesting that there is such a thing as over-parenting - being involved in a way that is over-controlling, over-protecting, perhaps even over-perfecting in such a way that is beyond responsible parenting. Preventing failure and not encouraging children to be challenged robs them of the understanding that they can handle failure, frustration and disappointment; life skills which promote resilience. A possible result of doing too much for a child is that the underlying message is "my parent does not trust me to do this on my own" and this can lead to a lack of confidence to even try. If the parent is always there to prevent a problem there is little to no chance of him/her learning to cope with disappointment and loss. A likely result of this will be to make the child feel less than competent to cope on their own with the usual and expected stresses of life. A study from the University of Mary Washington has shown that over-parenting is associated with higher levels of child anxiety and depression (Schiffman HH et al (2013). Helping or hovering? The effects of helicopter parenting on college students' well-being. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*).

If parents are always stepping in and doing everything/anything to relieve feelings of sadness and/or frustration the message is that the parent/s believe the child is not strong enough to function when unhappy. Melbourne clinical psychologist, Andrew Fuller's answer to where to draw the line between protecting and over-protecting our kids is, 'Try not to do things for your child that they could do for themselves.'

One of the main roles of parents is to teach children how to achieve independence and doing less for your kids not more, the older they become, promotes independence in them.

Determining when to encourage independence and when to protect children is not an easy task for parents of our time; a time when families are bombarded with news of the world being a dangerous place. Here are some guidelines that can help children to be cautious and develop their independence at the same time.

- **Increase freedom with maturity.** From preschool through adolescence, set continuously broadened limits so children's freedom is gradually increased as they show maturity and responsibility.
- **Teach problem solving.** Praise good thinking and good decision making. Believe in your children's ability to solve problems. Practise problem solving; for example, ask children, 'What can you do if you think you are endangered by a 'big kid'?' 'Who can you ask for help?' 'When would you need to call 000?' 'What do you think is the best

thing to do now that has let you down?' Children can learn about stranger danger, good and bad touching and what to do in an emergency from their preschool years and beyond.

- **Expose children to communication tools.** Children generally learn to use a phone from an early age these days and being able to communicate using a variety of devices is something they have over previous generations.
- **Permit your children to have adventures.** Don't deprive them of opportunities when reasonable precautions have been taken and adult safeguards are in place. Adventures encourage a spirit of initiative, motivation, independence, and resilience that will help your children to eventually become stronger adults.
- Interpret children's environments. Help older children to put news of disasters and even violence into perspective. Knowing about dangers that have happened to others does not necessarily mean they are in danger. Help them to feel secure in safe places and cautious when they may be in real danger.
- Help children to become emotionally resilient. Model the ways in which you are emotionally resilient; the ways you deal effectively and respectfully with conflict and with feelings of sadness, frustration and disappointment. Don't rescue your children from reality by making excuses for them. Encourage them to talk with the person who has upset them and help them to prepare for explaining to the other person how they were affected. Emotional overprotection will teach your children to look for an easy way out and will prevent them from becoming resilient.

Getting children from childhood to adulthood involves suffering for both parents and kids, it means letting them struggle, allowing them to be disappointed, and when failure occurs, helping them to work through it. It means letting your children do tasks that they are physically and mentally capable of doing.

It also means experiencing pride and joy when you see your child manage to rise above a hurtful situation or solve a tricky issue with friends. It means being able to relax a little when you see them manage and cope with the challenges that come their way and then confidently take a step back next time they are faced with similar. Herein lies one of the true joys of watching your children grow. Doing too much for them robs both you and them of this pleasure.

A challenge for you: Think of a job you regularly do for your child that he or she can do for him or herself. Explain your expectation for that job, then step back and enable your child to do it for themselves regularly from that point on. Once this task/chore becomes automatic, you can sit back and congratulate yourself on helping your child to become one step closer to the ultimate goal: independence.

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