

How to Build Independence in Preschoolers

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Helping youngsters develop skills — and a sense of self

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From birth, children are on a quest for independence. We see this as babies try to spoon-feed themselves or insist on taking off their own diapers, as toddlers demand to dress themselves or turn the faucet on at the sink.

Opportunities to develop independence are immensely important for building a sense of self and self-esteem — not to mention frustration tolerance and perseverance!

Still, as parents it's hard not to groan at the thought of our preschoolers racing for the step stool, climbing up, and then trying to pour themselves a glass of milk. Letting children carry out tasks often means that the task will take twice as long — and be three times as messy. And it can be hard to watch your child try, fail and feel frustrated or disappointed.

Given how high our stress levels are at the moment, our tolerance for inconvenience and mess may be more limited than usual. But being home-bound during COVID-19 also creates a great opportunity for parents to nurture budding independence — and eventually get some more space for yourself. Here are some simple ways to do just that.

Set predictable routines

It may seem surprising, but establishing a consistent routine is important for nurturing independence. Just like adults, when children can anticipate their day, they are better equipped to take on responsibilities. Not to be confused with a schedule (though the two might overlap), a routine is any sequence of events that occurs throughout the day. Even the act of brushing teeth is a routine, because it has multiple steps that always go in the same order: turn on the water, rinse the toothbrush, put on toothpaste, brush, rinse, dry hands and mouth. Likewise, going outside involves putting on coat and shoes, maybe packing a snack or remembering a favorite toy or doll.

As children experience these routines over and over, they learn to anticipate what comes next, and they start to take on more responsibility with less help. If you let your child do some of the prep work, such as putting the toothpaste on their toothbrush, or finding their coat and shoes, they will increasingly take on more of these steps on their own. And you are communicating to them that you have faith in their ability to do these steps without you, but also that you are there to help if they need it.

Let your child choose

Another way to support your child's independence (and to fill time in the endless COVID days!) is to give them choices. Involve them in deciding what to wear, what to play or who to call. This does not have to mean they have free rein. Provide two or three options, and then praise their great ability to make a choice! Providing choices is especially valuable when your preschooler insists on doing something their way. For example, they might want to cross the street by themselves, which might be something you can't let them do. By offering a choice – to hold your hand or to be carried – they can feel empowered even while you keep them safe.

Let your child help

Children love to help! In addition to building independence, this is a great tool for calming tantrums or redirecting behavior by giving them a sense of control. When you allow your child to help, you foster their confidence and give them an opportunity to learn something new. While this may involve adding an extra step or two, it is also a great way to involve your child in daily routines and activities.

For example, when making scrambled eggs, an adult might pour the milk directly into the bowl and dispose of the shells directly in the garbage. As an alternative, consider pouring milk into a small cup or pitcher and asking your child to pour it into the bowl. Likewise, collect the eggshells in a small bowl and ask your child to help dump them in the garbage.

Again, you are communicating to your child that you trust them to take on these tasks, and these moments also provide an opportunity for back-and-forth conversation about an activity with a shared goal. Plus, kids are more likely to get excited about, and then eat(!), food that they helped prepare. So having your child snap off the ends of string beans may be another way to sneak more greens into their diet.

Give your child chores

Even preschoolers can start to have chores. These, of course, will look different than those older children, but they are important steppingstones for building up to larger tasks. A lot of research supports chores for children as a way of building a

sense of responsibility and self-reliance, developing executive functions, teaching teamwork and nurturing empathy.

Simple tasks like picking up toys or putting laundry in the basket allow your child to have reasonable responsibility and help with maintaining structure throughout the day. In fact, these chores can be embedded into your daily routines. For example, part of your child's mealtime routine can include bringing their plate to the sink or even helping load the dishwasher (keep the knives for yourself!).

Let your child solve problems

Be sure to allow your child to try things that are hard and to solve (small) problems on their own. Many times, we project our stress or frustration onto children when, in fact, they are happy problem-solvers. When children are first learning to crawl or walk, we must let them fall. Similarly, when children are learning to put on their shoes, we must allow them to put them on the wrong feet. Wait until your child asks for help or provide a small hint to get them to the next step.

Presenting your child with tasks that are a little bit challenging, but still within the realm of what they can do with some support, helps them learn to deal with frustration, solve problem, and stick out challenging situations. You can acknowledge that something is hard and let your child know that you are proud by offering praise for trying new or difficult things. However, be sure to praise the effort rather than the outcome or skill: "I'm so proud of you for sticking with that even when it got hard," rather than, "You're so good at tying your shoes!"

Encourage projects

Projects, which can include anything from coloring to building to puzzles to crafts, provide opportunities for children to focus their attention on a contained activity for a period of time. Commenting on and complimenting your child's work gives them a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem, and praising your child's effort helps with the development of grit. When you encourage your child to keep trying to string beads into a necklace, you are communicating to them that you believe in their ability to do something, which translates into confidence and, after he has been successful, accomplishment and pride.

Nurture free play

Independent and unstructured play is very important for fostering creativity, problem-solving and autonomy. However, most preschool children will still need (and want!) some engagement from parents during unstructured play time.

Offer your preschooler a variety of art materials (crayons, markers, chalk, finger paints), building materials (blocks, MagnaTiles, Legos) or imaginary play props and let them construct their own craft or play. You can also include materials that are

not toys at all. Repurposed materials and recyclables, such as paper towel rolls, coffee canisters and cereal boxes can be used in endless ways. A paper towel roll can be a telescope, a tube, a car, a plane, a magic wand. A cereal box can be a barn for animals, a building block or a steppingstone.

Observe your child and notice what they're drawn to. One child may be interested in stacking and construction, while another wants to play pretend. Use these observations to guide and extend their play. If they seem stuck or confused, you can model a solution or comment on their actions, and then encourage them to try again on their own.

As you watch, try not to intervene. You might comment on what they are doing and praise their efforts, but do not do the work for them. For example, if they are stacking canisters, you might comment, "Wow. I see you are stacking cans. You are making a tall tower." As your child plays more, you can play less. You can make suggestions or model how to use materials in different ways, or even introduce some new materials. This will help to extend play and, over time, your child will be able to play on their own for longer.

What to say while they work and play

In addition to setting up opportunities for your child to build independence, it's important for you to let them know that you see them — their efforts, their persistence, their bravery, their growth. By offering verbal feedback, you are giving positive attention to the qualities that you want to foster in your child and making it more likely these behaviors will happen again.

What we call the "P-R-I-D-E" skills are strategies that have been shown to help increase positive behaviors in young children:

- **PRAISE:** Praise your child's appropriate behavior. This helps increase the specific behavior that you are addressing and contributes to a warm interaction with your child. For example, "Great job lining up those blocks!" or, "I'm proud of you for sticking with that puzzle!"
- **REFLECT:** Reflect appropriate speech. This helps demonstrate to your child that you are listening and understanding. For example, your child says, "I made a tower." And then you say, "You made a tower!"
- **IMITATE** appropriate behavior and play. This gives positive attention (the most powerful reward) to good behavior and promotes cooperation. For instance, when your child builds a tower, you begin to stack blocks too.
- **DESCRIBE** your child's appropriate behavior. This reinforces your child's positive play and draws their attention to it. You might say, "I see you drew a rainbow!" or, "We are building a tower together."
- Be **ENTHUSIASTIC!** This makes your interactions feel warmer and keeps your child interested. For example, you can use a playful voice, exaggerate your emotions when you're talking and smile often.

