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Independence and Autonomy

There are many reasons why parents do things for children that children could do for themselves. As children grow older we often continue to care for them as if they were younger; there is simply a slight lag between the child's maturing and our recognition of it. Or, we may simply want to make a statement to the child that we are still the nurturing, caring adult we were when the child was younger. Just as often, adults jump in because it is just so much easier to do it yourself.

Of course, it is simpler and faster to dress your child than to wait for him to dress himself. It is simpler and faster to push a stroller than to argue about using two feet. Diapers are easier than underwear. Sippy cups are easier than open ones. Mealtimes are more efficient if you do a little spoon-feeding even when the child is more than able to feed herself. And, sometimes, you just can't face the battle you envision about giving up the bottle or the pacifier.

Does it really matter how long you continue to put your child's shoes on for him? Does it really matter if your child rides in a stroller long past the time she really fits comfortably in it? Why shouldn't you spoon-feed your three year-old? And especially why not do these things if your child seems to enjoy them? Why do teachers make such a big deal about fostering independence and autonomy?

Parents often express to me a wish that their children be assertive, speak up for themselves in group situations, and feel confident when handling conflicts. Parents want their children to enter new situations comfortably. You want your children to think for themselves and to be able to make good choices. You want your children to succeed at the challenges of academic work.

It is impossible to achieve these broader goals for your children without first supporting them through simple early childhood milestones like getting dressed, eating independently, wearing underpants all the time, walking instead

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of being pushed and giving up vestiges of infancy like the breast, the bottle, the pacifier or the sippy cup.

Some children embrace independence and may even want to take on more than they are really ready for. Other children may feel threatened by independence; they are afraid that they will lose parental nurture and love. A few may even feel guilty if they feel you want them to stay dependent. And some children are just waiting for your cues. Not every child will be toilet trained at exactly the same age. Some children have an easy separation at school and some don't. Every child is different. It is important to consider temperament, family patterns and expectations, culture, and all sorts of variables as you decide when and how hard to push your child to take on more independence. But most children will need your encouragement and approval as they learn new skills and become active participants in their own care.

When you communicate your age-appropriate expectations and stand by those expectations you are also communicating your confidence in the child's ability to meet those expectations.

When you continue to do things for your child that she is able to do for herself, you may be giving an unintentional and undermining message that you don't think your child is actually capable of doing these things for herself.

The school world is structured to meet the child's needs, to foster all this development and it is far easier for us than for you to wait for a two year-old to put on his own shoes, to sit out the tantrum of the child who is convinced that we should pour her water into her cup. There are times when any sane parent will opt for the stroller or shove arms into sleeves. But there must also be times to communicate your confidence in your child's growing abilities; to provide recognition of what your child has achieved. At school we often hear the question, "How did you get her to do that?" Sometimes the answer is as simple as, "By expecting her to."

Kate & Meredith