

NurseryWorld

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Independence

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Independence is an essential life skill and one that needs to be nurtured from an early age. The term is often understood to mean a range of skills, from helping children to be apart from their families to developing skills in dressing and encouraging them to think for themselves. In fact, all aspects of independence are important for children to learn to be self-sufficient individuals.

The drive for independence starts from babyhood. Young babies rapidly make decisions about what they play with, what they like to eat and who they prefer to be with. Toddlers will thrive in a healthy environment where they have opportunities to do more and more for themselves.

Practitioners, however, recognise that children will only be sufficiently confident to start to deal with the world themselves if they come from a background of security, support and adult love. Two restrictions to a child's growing independence occur when they are overprotected or where they are pressured into achieving developmental milestones too early.

Healthy toddlers strive to develop skills that enable them to become less physically dependent on adults. They insist on trying to dress and feed themselves, and they want to move to explore new territories. Many parents welcome this and encourage their young children to become practical and useful family members. They are shown how to take responsibility for small tasks such as watering the plants and laying the table. Older children build on this, but as a consequence of the varying opportunities they have had at home, children start nursery with very different levels of physical and functional independence.

Practitioners recognise that those children who are already self-sufficient are likely to adapt more easily to life in a group setting. They feel more in control of their lives, and this gives them self-respect. Children who are more dependent need time and encouragement to do things for themselves.

However, if we look at independence in a broader sense, it includes children becoming independent learners.

Anyone who has worked in or visited an early years setting where children make decisions about what they are doing, where and with whom, cannot fail to be impressed with the competence and responsible autonomy shown.

It becomes clear that when children are supported and encouraged to think for themselves, they show themselves to be very capable. However, this does not just happen. Some of the most important attributes of independent learning include children being able to use the environment for themselves, to make choices and decisions and to start to develop their own thoughts and views. Young children need to be introduced to these attributes and then encouraged to practise them.

Case study

At home, two-year-old Elise was never allowed to try to climb stairs and only permitted to walk outside with an adult on a rein. When she started nursery aged three and a half, her parents were persuaded to allow her to do more for herself and to have more freedom. But by this time she was tentative about taking the smallest risk and her movements were poorly co-ordinated.

Elise's parents, with the best of intentions, had failed to encourage their daughter to learn through trial and error, with the result that her confidence and physical development were delayed.

Suggestions for practice

Promote physical and functional independence:

- * Help children to tidy resources. For example, provide a dustpan and brush for clearing up dry sand and a floor cloth or short-handled mop for coping with spillages.
- * Encourage children to take responsibility for their own possessions, such as clipping Wellington boots together with a named wooden peg.
- * Play a game to help children know where things are kept. Put articles such as crayons, counters and blocks in a drawstring bag. Ask children in turn to take an item from the bag and return it to its proper place.

Offer choices and decision-making in activities:

- * Painting: provide paper of different shapes, sizes and colours. Make the paper easily accessible by placing it on a low table
- * Construction: provide options. Add pebbles, sticks, stones and shells to the block area. Provide rubber bands, masking tape and Blu-Tack for fixing.

Have available collections of miniature play figures to add to the construction.

- * Storytime: offer alternatives for a story and ask children to vote for their choice.

Encourage reflection:

- * Offer a structure to support independent thinking. For example, provide an attractive pictorial chart and gradually introduce the following questions. 'What do I want to do? Who do I want as a working friend? What things do I need to work with? Where do I find them? How well did we do it?' Talk through each of these questions with the children and model examples of how they might respond to them. Over time, children will come to use these questions for themselves.

Questions for practitioners

Which of the following things have I done today that the children could have done for themselves?

- * clearing away
- * delivering messages
- * setting up the outdoor play
- * preparing materials such as making playdough, mixing paints and combining ingredients for cookery

* choosing food for snack time

* selecting materials for constructions.

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