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# how INDEPENDENT should your child be?

by Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg with Llewellyn Miller



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EACH YEAR at this time when we are getting ready to celebrate Independence Day and our most treasured possession—our freedom of thought and action as citizens of democracy—I remember the questions a thoughtful young mother asked me on another Fourth of July.

She had had a hard day dealing with problems of independence on the home front. All four of her lively youngsters had gone a bit far in skirmishes for personal liberty, as even the best-guided children do occasionally.

Fourteen-year-old Susie had spent the morning with her best friend adding bronze streaks to her blond hair. ("But it's my hair, Mother!")

Eight-year-old Toby, inspired by the novelty of an allowance, had mortgaged three weeks' income for a cat—in his eyes a sound growth investment since she was soon to have kittens. ("But you said it was my money to spend!")

Five-year-old Tommy had staged a temper tantrum when told he couldn't go swimming with his best friend. ("But I want to!")

The baby had upended his cup of milk into his feeding tray, solemnly murmuring "No-no-no" as he did so.

"What's wrong with them? Or with us?" she asked. "In encouraging them to make decisions for themselves, are we giving them more independence than they can handle? At what age can a child grasp the difference between independence and just having his own way?"

Those are among the most important questions parents can ask themselves.

We want our children to be independent. We also want them to be cooperative. This is not the easiest combination to teach or to learn. Growing up is the process of becoming increasingly responsible for one's own behavior and welfare within the framework of respect for the rights and welfare of others.

The essence of effective guidance by parents is anticipating each child's readiness for

the next little freedom from control. We must relax restraints, one after the other, so that the child is free to take a new step toward independence at the moment he is ready. We must neither invite rebellion by holding him back nor burden him by demanding responsibility and judgment beyond his capacity.

#### What Are the First Signs?

The urge to independence shows itself early. In the first months of life the infant is wholly dependent, but he is also an autocrat, not concerned with any needs or wishes but his own. He needs, and should have, immediate loving response to his demands, for this golden age of absolute power is soon over. Once the baby starts to crawl, he must grasp a huge new concept—the hard meaning of the word "No."

For his own protection, he must learn to curb his impulse to touch the hot stove, chew on electric-light wires, climb on the table.

He learns quickly that there is some kind of connection between personal liberty and paying attention to "No." Freedom to explore the floor is dependent upon staying away from the fireplace? Okay. But how about the wastebasket? "No." Are books for tearing? "No-no." Are cigarettes tasty? "No-no-no."

There is so much that toddlers must be gently taught not to do that it is small wonder many parents make a refrain of "Don't," not realizing that serious problems with older children are rooted in this period of "No" and "Stop" prolonged beyond real need.

Here is where independence in its most limited sense begins to show itself. If we understand this and stop the tiny ones only when necessary, our problems with them in later years become much simpler.

"What's the matter with Jerry? All of a sudden he opposes me in everything," said a young mother bewildered by a very common reaction of children between two and three. "He says 'No' automatically even when he means 'Yes.' Yesterday, just to test him, I said, 'Do you want this candy?' and he said 'No!' happily holding out his hand!"

Nothing was the matter with good little Jerry. All he was doing was giving back the word he was always hearing whenever he initiated some project of his own, and showing his mother that he was feeling a bit hemmed in.

"Ann pays no attention when I tell her to

Between the extremes of giving him too much freedom and too little freedom lies the ideal approach suggested by this noted child-guidance authority.

put away her toys. She goes right ahead with whatever she is doing as if she were deaf," the mother of a three-year-old complained, focusing on another aspect of a child's growth toward independence.

This brings me to one of the most important techniques in guiding children of all ages to a comfortable balance of cooperativeness and independence. Unquestioning obedience is not an end in itself, not a basic virtue. Our aim as parents is to guide children to take their own responsibilities happily and willingly. To do this, we must always con-

sider what is in the child's mind as well as what we want.

"Stop that, and put your toys away," strikes Ann as a senseless suggestion when she has turned from them and is absorbed in building a house of blocks. It's unnatural, too. Putting away toys does not represent order to her. Actually, it represents disorder—the disturbance of things she has arranged to suit herself. So she turns that well-known deaf ear, or protests, "No!" and starts a battle. The next step is punishment and tears.

"But she has to learn to be neat, and that the house belongs to the whole family," argues her mother in the same words we hear so often from parents of teen-agers.

She does, indeed, but an arbitrary command is not the way to teach her neatness. At three she does not comprehend orderliness except as something demanded by adults for their convenience, not hers.

If Ann had been playing with sand and pebbles, twigs and stones outside, no one would have asked her to put them away. Why is inside different? This is confusing. Play is a child's work. Calling a child away from play must be considered a serious interruption of his work. If we give fair warning, and are as courteous about interrupting as we would be with an adult, with something such as, "It's almost time to stop now for supper. I'll help you put the toys away so we'll have them nicely in place when you want them tomorrow," the child will respond happily. He'll learn that toys, inside, must be put away for safety and convenience.

#### Making Restraints Count

It is necessary to hold the hand of a small child at a street crossing. No spirited child cares for this, but he will accept it in good grace if his mother lets him go once the hazardous crossing is passed, and says, "Now! You can walk by yourself again." This lets him know that he is not being restrained arbitrarily or longer than needed for his protection. It puts emphasis on his independence to run freely when it is safe to do so, rather than on the limitation of his freedom.

Patty, 14, suddenly finds it irksome to come straight home from school "like a kindergartner." Her mother agrees that certainly she is ready for a little more freedom. "Just so long as you telephone and tell me which of your friends you are visiting," she adds, wisely combining a gratifying amount of independence with supervision she still needs.

#### Each Child Is Different

Each new step toward independence is a matter of delicate judgment. Recognizing these important moments is a real challenge, since children develop at widely different rates. A new liberty for one child may be totally inappropriate for another of the same age, or under different circumstances.

Billy could be trusted to cross the street alone when he was five. It was not safe for his sister to do so until she was seven. This was not a matter of difference in intelligence, judgment, or capacity for independence. It was entirely a matter of traffic having speeded up enormously in the interim.

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