

Stop Coddling!

Why it's important to foster independence in kids with special needs

BY MARY ANN ROMANS



Cameron Houghton sits on the floor amid a group of toys. The 4-year-old NJ Shore resident has a hard decision to make — which ones to play with. As he makes his selection, he undergoes an important rite of passage: By acting on his decision, Cameron exerts his own independence.

Encourage Independence

Encouraging a child with special needs to be as independent as possible is not only practical but “gives dignity,” according to Kathleen Wilkins. She and our other experts and parents have given us some practical ways to do just that.

- Begin early.
- Focus on strengths.
- Have expectations.
- Set daily, weekly and monthly goals.
- Break tasks into smaller chunks.
- Set up routines.
- Practice repetition and rehearse tasks.
- Teach basic life skills to the child’s ability.
- Work closely with your child’s school to figure out what works best for your child.
- Create verbal scripts that your child can follow when self-advocating.
- Have patience and realize that learning new, independent skills can take months.
- Be careful not to express frustration or disappointment in front of your child.
- Let your children know they are loved.

Most preschoolers test their limited autonomy in similar ways on a daily basis. But for Cameron, who has cerebral palsy and is nonmobile and nonverbal, this act of independence is significant.

“I think it is important to make sure that he does experience what a normal-functioning child experiences,” says Cameron’s mom, Angela. “Just because he is disabled, that shouldn’t hold him back. Children with disabilities are ultimately children. They need to be treated like any other child, with love, respect and attention. They may need a little bit more help, but at the end of the day, they are still children.”

Frankfield, PA mom-of-three Natalie Pastore Haggerty is familiar with the need to encourage independence in a child with special needs. Her middle daughter, 6-year-old Brenna, has Down syndrome. "I help Brenna practice her independence through encouragement," Haggerty says. "It is a work in progress. Telling her she can do it and giving her the opportunity, positive reinforcement and praise when she completes a task work well."

Independence vs. instinct

According to local experts, Houghton and Haggerty are setting the right tone to help their kids in the future — yet are working against their own parental instincts. "Parents feel a deeper need to protect children with special needs, because those children are typically more vulnerable," says Maleita Olson, LCSW, the cofounder and clinical director of Spectra Support Services in Broomall, PA.

"Parents may feel badly for the pain their child has suffered," says Kathleen M. Wilkins, PhD, director of clinical services at Valley Forge Educational Services in Malvern, PA. "This individual has a disability, and parents see the struggle a child goes through to do the most simplistic things; there is a feeling of not wanting them to have the pain of failure."

Practical considerations can also play a role in coddling. "There is kind of a reality of life there," says Wilkins. "We live in a fast-paced culture, and sometimes it is easier just to do things for them." In the long run, that tack can be detrimental. "At some point, they may lose the valuable skills they need to fit in with the world," Wilkins cautions.

"Fit in with the world"

"I have a saying: You can't teach a child to be independent outside the home until they are independent inside the home," says Olson. "Parents have a strong influence over how their children perceive their own abilities. Kids tend to rise to what is expected of them. If less is expected, less will be received, and the child will ultimately grow to be a less independent adult."

To impart autonomy to a child with special needs, "You have to begin very early, and the first thing parents need to do is to set up an expectation of independence," agrees Wilkins. "Focus on the child's strengths, and then use those strengths to help him adapt to and accommodate his deficits and needs."

Heidi Mizell, the resource coordinator of Autism Delaware and the parent of a 25-year-old with autism spectrum disorder, agrees that parents should do what they can to impart independence early, especially as children prepare to enter school. "Teaching them some self-advocacy skills is important," she says. "You want a child to be prepared to identify their strengths and be able to dictate them."

Working against instinct

"If parents coddle their child," Wilkins says, "it can leave them with ongoing anxiety and no comfort in the fact that their child can accomplish things and be independent when they are no longer able to help. 'What happens when I am gone?' is a common concern."

"When our children are out of our sight, we need to have the confidence that we have taught them to be safe in the community," Mizell says. "It benefits both the child and the parents."

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