

## The Illusion of Independence

During my years as a parent educator, I frequently asked parents, "What are your goals for your children? What kind of people do you want them to become?" Most commonly, their simultaneous, immediate response was an emphatic, "Independent! We want them to be independent!" What is this fascination with independence?

I realize this obsession with independence probably stems from our political history, given that the cornerstone of our country's foundation is the *Declaration of Independence*. Apparently what seemed to be a reasonable national goal was adopted as a reasonable personal goal as well. But in reality, while we may be a self-governing nation, we are far from independent.

We are not hermits. Nor are we preparing children to live in isolation. We are social beings, incapable of surviving independently from one another or the world around us. So why do we continue to set this unattainable goal for ourselves and our children? A goal that leads people to live with the illusion of independence - assuming they have achieved independence because they live hundreds or thousands of miles from their parents. Believing they are independent because they have cut themselves off from anyone who ever caused them pain. Convinced they are independent because they have managed to remain uncommitted to anyone or anything other than themselves.

Lately I have observed a worrisome trend. The typical scenario involves a young child, sometimes still in diapers, toddling along the sidewalk of a busy street, an open body of water, or the edge of a natural or constructed precipice. The parent or parents, from several yards behind, are yelling at the child, who continues to move forward, to WAIT! The parent or parents sprint to grab the child seconds before what was a completely preventable situation becomes a tragic accident.

Equally troubling are parents who excuse disrespectful, disruptive, even abusive behavior by attributing it to their child's budding independence or "spirit." Confusing "spirit" with misbehavior leads to bad habits, not independence. These practices appear to be embraced as part of an effort to allow independence to emerge in an uninhibited, natural fashion. However well-intentioned, these efforts are misguided for at least three reasons: 1) Independence is not the result of an absence of limits, 2) Independence need not be thwarted, nor "spirit" broken, through the process of acquiring self-control, and 3) There is no such thing as independence.

Since there is no such thing as independence, logically, independence cannot be a goal of parenting. Perhaps a more realistic goal of parenting is raising people who are capable of establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. Thus, the job of parenting requires us to continually address the delicate balance between needs - ours and our children's - for separateness and connectedness - for individuality and community - of self and others. The balance between these needs changes over time with age, maturity, and experience - ours and theirs. The ways in which our children need us will change.

Changes in goals require changes in strategy. There are skills our children need and parenting strategies that accompany this shift in focus from independence to relationship.

**Promote self-reliance.** Many of us fall into the habit of doing things for our children that they could do for themselves. Taking over these tasks seems to make things easier (for us), save time (ours), and assure that they get done "right" (our way), but in the long run we are doing our children a disservice. Oftentimes, they interpret our willingness to step in and take over as, "I can't do anything right so why try?" or "I am not responsible for taking care of myself." Given time, our children's self-reliance gets flabby and out of shape like an unused muscle.

Our job includes teaching our children how to take care of their bodies, their belongings, and their obligations. In the process, it is essential that we: 1) Pay attention to when they are ready to take on responsibility in these areas, 2) Take the time to properly train them, 3) Demonstrate patience while they practice, and 4) Step back and let them exercise their self-reliance. By turning over to our children those things they have demonstrated the ability to do for themselves, we send the message, "I have confidence that you can do it." When we have confidence in our children, they have confidence in themselves.

Avoid confusing self-reliance with independence. Our children need to be self-reliant, not because they will one day be independent, but because every day for the rest of their lives they will be living in relationship with others. Self-reliant individuals have successful relationships because they are clear on where another person's responsibility ends and theirs begins.

***Promoting self-reliance requires modeling self-reliance.***

**Foster self-awareness.** When we presume to know what our children think and feel, and what they want, we deny them the opportunity to know and express who they are. When we make statements like, "You know you don't think science is boring," or "You can't possibly be tired. You just took a nap," or "You know you'd rather play sports than dance," we reveal more about ourselves than about our children.

Our job includes teaching our children how to think, not what to think; how to accurately identify and appropriately express their feelings, not what to feel; and how to make choices that will assist in reaching their goals, not our goals. While our children may be like us, they are not us. Kahlil Gibran wisely explains, "...You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you, for life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday..."

Avoid confusing self-awareness with self-centeredness. Our children need to be aware of what they think, how they feel, their likes and dislikes, not so they can always get what they want, but so they can more honestly share who they are with others. ***Fostering self-awareness requires modeling self-awareness.***

**Nurture self-esteem.** When we convey to our children that they are unconditionally loved and valued, we are nurturing their self-esteem. Unconditional love does not mean unconditional approval and permission to do whatever you want or behave however you like. Our children know they are loved and valued when we express our appreciation for their efforts, demonstrate our affection for them just because they are, and care enough to stop them when they are doing what they shouldn't until they learn to stop themselves.

Avoid confusing self-esteem with selfishness. Our children need to value and love themselves, not so they can feel better than others, but so they can feel better about others. The extent to which they are able to care for and value themselves will be the extent to which they are able to care for and value others. ***Nurturing self-esteem requires modeling self-esteem.***

**Encourage initiative.** We live in a world full of things that need doing. We cannot afford to excuse our children from doing these tasks by declaring, "Somebody ought to do something about that." Whether it is as simple as seeing that the floor needs to be swept or the leaves need to be raked, or as complex as seeing people without a place to sleep or food to eat, the job is ours. While we may not be able to complete the job alone, it is our responsibility to do what we can.

Avoid confusing taking initiative with taking credit. Our children need to know that when they see a job that needs to be done, that they are capable of doing, they should do it - not because of the recognition they can get, but because of the difference they can make. ***Encouraging initiative requires modeling initiative.***

**Instill empathy.** Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in another's situation in an attempt to respond in a helpful, meaningful way. Living in relationship requires that we try to see things from perspectives other than our own. An empathetic person will ask him/herself, "If that were me, how would I feel? What would I wish someone would do or say?" and then act accordingly.

Avoid confusing empathy with pity. Pity is immobilizing and breeds contempt, whereas empathy is motivating and inspires hope. Our children need to be able to appreciate the plight of others and have compassion, not so they can give others fish, but so they can teach others how to fish. ***Instilling empathy requires modeling empathy.***

**Teach effective communication.** Communication is effective when the message received is the message intended. Since we can't not communicate, we want to be sure that our words match our tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Listening is the other key element in effective communication. Listening requires a total body experience that includes our eyes and feelings, as well as our ears. The feelings behind the words are just as important as the words themselves.

Avoid confusing effective communication with talking. People can talk for hours and never communicate effectively. Not only do our children need to be able to clearly express themselves, they need to be willing to listen to and understand others. ***Teaching effective communication requires modeling effective communication***

Each of us is the product of all the relationships we have ever had. We are indelibly linked to the past and the future through these connections. Greater knowledge of and attention to these connections enhances our identity as an individual and as a family. Maintaining relationships takes time and energy, but they are well spent in this endeavor. "There are two special gifts we should give our children. One is roots. The other is wings." Not just roots. Not just wings. Both. The deeper we plant the roots, the stronger the wings.

Our goal as parents is to raise people who know how to live in relationship to self and others. We are not merely raising sons and daughters. We are preparing husbands and wives - fathers and mothers. Like this great country we call home, they must learn to be self-governing, but

they will never be independent. If we do our job well, they will not always need us, but hopefully, they will always want us. Happy Interdependence Day!