

Ages & Stages: Nurturing Young Children's Independence

By providing just the right amount of support and challenge, you can nurture children's drive toward self-reliance

By Carla Poole, Susan A. Miller, EdD, and Ellen Booth Church

- Grades: **Early Childhood, PreK–K**

Stage by Stage 0 - 2

- With growing motor and cognitive skills, toddlers want to do more for themselves.
- Toddlers need activities suited to their abilities so that they don't become bored or give up.
- Physical environments that encourage independence foster young children's growing need to participate in "adult" tasks, such as cleaning up after snack and washing hands before and after.

Stage by Stage 3 - 4

- Threes are beginning to control their feelings and their communication is increasingly verbal.
- Sometimes, threes and fours express their independence with "No!" statements throughout the day.
- Fours may respond negatively to efforts to restrict their behavior.

Stage by Stage 5 - 6

- At this age, children begin to see themselves as separate from the adults around them and work to form their own identities.
- Kindergartners have an increased ability to accept and manage challenges.
- Five- and six-year-olds may test limits and experiment with contrary behavior.

0 to 2 "ME DO!" by Carla Poole

Baby Ashley squirms as she makes soft gurgling sounds. Her eyes are half open as she turns toward her teacher's soothing voice. Suddenly a look of discomfort sweeps across the 2-month-old's face. Right away, Ashley's teacher senses she may need to be fed. The teacher's quick response to Ashley's signal lays the foundation for the infant's overall development.

Ashley was born with many competencies. She communicates, initiates interactions, and even imitates facial expressions. Yet she is completely dependent on caring adults to respond to her every physical and emotional need. Now, let's consider a feisty 2 ½-year-old who talks, runs, uses the toilet (at least sometimes), and feeds herself. What's the reason for this impressive development? Nurturing relationships that encourage the child's drive toward independence are the essential ingredient.

Tuning In to One Another

During the first year, it's important to follow babies' cues and develop a schedule around their individual needs. Form a sense of teamwork with them as they learn to manage sensations such as hunger, fatigue, and elimination. Tune in to their preferences and unique temperaments. This helps them feel secure and confident. You become the emotional and physical home base that they rely on when they begin to explore. As they learn to crawl, they will move away and return to you, depending on their need.

Doing It on Their Own

As the toddlers' motor and thinking skills develop, they begin to want to do more for themselves. The difficulty begins when they can't quite do what they want to do. For example, 20-month-old Michael has decided he is finished playing at the water table. He starts pulling at his smock, but it won't come off. Michael's teacher watches him as he tries another way to slip his arm out of the armhole. This doesn't work either, and he looks frustrated, saying "No!" rather loudly. When his teacher asks him if he wants help, Michael begins to shriek, "Me do! Me do!" She waits a few moments and gently replies, "I see you really want to do that yourself. I can open the back so you can take it off

yourself." Michael grudgingly agrees. After a minimum of help, Michael is able to take off his smock, which he proudly hands to his teacher, proclaiming, "Me do!"

Michael's teacher formed a partnership with him, something that requires patience and respect when a frustrated toddler is losing his cool. She let him "own" his accomplishment and helped him without taking over.

The teacher was also sensitive to Michael's frustration level. She simplified the task just enough for him to be able to do it. Toddlers need activities suited to their abilities. If a task is too difficult, they become frustrated and give up. Conversely, if the activity presents no challenge, toddlers become bored.

Set Up for Self-Help

Toddlers often enjoy doing meaningful "adult" tasks. You can set up the physical environment to help toddlers become more independent. Provide:

- chairs that are easy to get in and out of independently;
- steps or stools at sinks so children can wash their hands;
- small pitchers for pouring and self-feeding skills;
- an empty tub in which children can deposit refuse at snack time;
- small cloths or sponges so they can help you clean up.

Limited language skills and strong emotions may make the toddler's path toward autonomy rather bumpy. Entice children to work with you during this exciting trip. Your guidance will help them become independent and lovingly connected.

What You Can Do:

Give young toddlers the opportunity to help with dressing and undressing. For example, pull a sock halfway off and ask the toddler to take it off.

Encourage independence by giving toddlers limited choices: "Do you want the red cup or the blue cup?" Respect children's preferences.

Be flexible and comfort toddlers when they need to be "babies" again. Becoming independent takes time.

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3 to 4 "I SAID NO!" by Susan A. Miller, Ed.D.

Three-year-old Emma takes her friend Nina's telephone away from her. Nina grabs it back and says, "I said no. It's mine!" Because threes are beginning to control their feelings and communicate verbally, Nina is able to assert herself through words instead of resorting to tantrums, hitting, or kicking.

Preschoolers revel in their newfound independence. They delight in deciding which friends to play with in the sandbox or whether to build a zoo or a farm in the blocks area. Being able to make such choices is a natural part of growing up, and gives threes and fours an exciting sense of themselves as powerful people. Sometimes, however, independence manifests itself in lots of "No, I don't want to" statements throughout the day.

Testing Limits

Fours, eager to test their limits, may respond defiantly to any efforts to restrict their behavior. When Joshua climbs to the very top of a structure, and his worried teacher says, "You are too high. It's not safe. Please come down," Joshua asserts himself and says, "No! You can't make me."

Although gaining assertiveness is a healthy part of growing up, teachers sometimes become annoyed or irritated when preschoolers act defiantly. However, we need to understand and respect the reasons for children's feelings and behaviors, while finding ways to make sure their assertiveness does not place them in physical jeopardy or hurt others' feelings. Here are some suggestions:

Investigate why. When parents drop off their children, listen to what they say about any changes at home; they may provide helpful clues as to why a child is acting negatively. Maybe Dad is away for a long trip and Troy misses him. Troy could probably use some special attention and time with you, drawing a card for Dad and dictating a personal message for him.

Discuss the problem. When a conflict arises, explain to the child, "I appreciate the way you are feeling. Let's talk about it." Joshua might tell you how hard it is to climb way up high and how unfair it is to have to come right down.

You can explain your concern for his safety. Together, you can agree on a rule that allows him to stay safe while he tries out his new skills.

Remember, situations that are beyond children's control—they got up too late for breakfast and are now hungry, or they visited Grandma last night and are over-tired—can cause "no" to emerge from frustrated preschoolers. Meeting children halfway, no matter what the cause of their defiance, can be the key to finding mutually agreeable solutions.

What You Can Do:

Provide reasonable alternative choices. For young threes, it is often appropriate to provide duplicates of popular materials to cut down on sharing problems.

Involve children in planning and rule making. Preschoolers are wonderful idea generators. Ask them for suggestions about rules so the learning environment becomes an extension of their needs and interests.

Role-play troublesome scenarios. Encourage children to play out some scenes with you so they can discuss and practice ways of not hurting one another's feelings.

Reinforce positive assertions and ignore negative ones, if possible. When a child shares with a peer or gets over a previously troublesome encounter, show your approval. On the other hand, try to ignore negative assertions. If a preschooler says, "I'm not eating snack today," remember that this is not the end of the world. When a child's safety is in question, however, you cannot ignore the situation.

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You can help children prepare for first grade by giving them increased responsibility through the end of the year

5 to 6 "I CAN DO IT!" by Ellen Booth Church

The children come bursting through the door on a sunny day in May. Jodelle is wearing her brightest shirt as she hops and bounces in. Jerome is decked out in khaki shorts and a Clifford T-shirt. He playfully enters on all fours, barking just like his hero! How different from the first days of school. The children's confidence in being fully and uniquely themselves is evident even in the way they enter the kindergarten classroom.

There is a strong desire in 5- and 6-year-olds to explore the world independently, particularly at the end of the kindergarten year. At this stage and time of year, they have learned so many new skills that they feel ready to take the world by storm!

Emerging Individuality

On the positive side, 5- and 6-year-olds are developing a stronger sense of self-confidence and identity than they have ever had. This is a time when children begin to truly see themselves as separate from parents and other adults. Children at this stage often develop a particular interest and style in dressing, play with particular things and friends, and expressively speak their mind. A kindergarten teacher at this time of the year can look at the group and see a very distinct and wonderful collection of individuals.

Developing Impulse Control

Part of this stage of emerging independence is the increased ability to accept and manage challenges. As children experience successes in kindergarten, they begin to feel the pleasure of learning how to do new things. The more success they have, the more they will be willing to accept greater challenges in school and at home.

An important part of this equation is self-control. At this stage of development, children are learning how to control their impulses. In a sense, they are learning to think before they react. They understand now that it is not wise to run out across traffic to chase a ball, or to hit a child who just took their toy. By adding this emerging skill of self-control to their growing ability to manage difficulties, children become able to recognize appropriate and inappropriate challenges and to act consciously in any number of situations.

Making Decisions

As children become more independent, they are asked to make more decisions. Kindergartners have more and more decisions to make—everything from whom to play with to deciding what activity to participate in. When children learn that they can make their own decisions and voice their opinions, they may explore how far they can push adults and the rules. Children at this stage of emerging independence like to test limits and sometimes experiment with contrary

behavior. It's important to understand that this is normal and even positive, while being clear about your expectations for behavior and participation.

Invite children to make decisions and express opinions about such things as the song or book to share at group time or the game to play when you go outside. But explain that safety issues such as crossing the street alone or climbing high in the playground tree are not appropriate for independent decision making. Five- and six-year-olds can begin to recognize the difference between safe and dangerous decisions. They can quickly comply with expectations when the distinction is made clear.

Looking Ahead

First grade is on the horizon for many children at this time of the year. First-grade teachers expect children to be able to take care of most of their personal needs, to follow directions without close guidance, and to be self-motivated in terms of working and learning.

You can help children prepare for first grade by giving them increased responsibility through the end of the year. If possible, visit a first-grade class with children to help them see what is ahead. Invite children to notice the independent activities first graders are engaged in. Upon returning to your classroom, discuss ways children can start experimenting with some of these skills now. It is also helpful to suggest ways parents can encourage independence at home over the summer, with activities such as dressing or setting the table. The process of becoming independent is filled with the pleasure of accomplishment and the pressure of responsibility. We can best support children during this phase by celebrating their achievements while carefully monitoring the amount and types of responsibility they take on.

What You Can Do:

- Provide more and more opportunities for children to make decisions and express opinions.
- Support children in working together to solve problems.
- Visit a first grade for "big school" practice.