

ENCOURAGE SELF-RELIANCE AS YOUR CHILD HEADS BACK TO SCHOOL

By Jill Crawford, LCSW

The start of a new school year...fresh school supplies, crisp new clothes, and renewed promises to stick to good routines and good habits. Unofficial New Year's resolutions are made with gusto—by parents and children alike—as the calendar turns to September and kids head back to school. As you begin to consider what good routines are made of, which good habits are important to cultivate—not just in your children, but in yourselves as parents and in your family as a whole—consider emphasizing self-reliance. By this I mean doing for oneself that which is within his or her ability, taking personal responsibility, having a sense of accountability. These are all important skills that are valued and rewarded in adults, and yet, as parents, we are often slow to call our children to these challenges. The irony is this: we want our children to become independent, to need us a little bit less each year...for this is a sign of healthy development. And yet, we often stand in their way (inadvertently, of course) by doing things we may simply consider good parenting, when actually we are overreaching.

The pop culture term for parents who “overparent” is “helicopter parenting,” as in hovering over our children. Others may label it “coddling” in a not-so-friendly tone. No matter how you slice it, the connotation is a negative one. And yet we as parents are getting worse. We are super-involved in everything from playdates to sports to academics, and this is the case at every age from toddlerhood up into the college years. Reports from colleges and employers hiring newly minted graduates indicate that these young adults are dependent on constant guidance, feedback, and even rewards. They do not trust their own instincts and are uncomfortable working independently. If you're not terribly concerned about those employers, then consider yourself, who may soon be the recipient of your adult child returning home looking for lodging, food, and the other trappings of dependent adolescence, even once they have their college degree and some legitimate earning power. Don't get too comfy with your empty nest—college doesn't last forever...So as your child heads back to school this fall, here are some ideas for encouraging and increasing self-reliance:

Get Packin'

Have your child pack his own backpack. Ultimately, it is the student who is responsible for remembering and completing his own assignments, and this should include returning them to the teacher independently. Besides homework, any additional items your child needs for school (gym shoes, band instruments, library books, etc.) are also his responsibility. If parents are willing to take on the burden of keeping track of the student's schedule and assorted responsibilities, then there is no need for the student to do it himself. Why bother? He knows his parents will take care of it for him. He will become dependent on his parents and take no ownership of his responsibilities. So give it a try—let him fend for himself. It will no doubt be tempting to chase him down at the bus stop when you see that math homework left behind on the kitchen table or the violin left by the door. But if you can resist temptation and let them experience the consequence of forgetting, it is far less likely to happen again in the future. When children are younger and still learning, a good intermediate step is to provide them with a cue (“Is there anything special you need for school today?”) to spark their memory. This way, you're giving them a small reminder to think about it, but they still have to come up with the answer on their own.

Studying

Along the same lines, encourage your child to do homework and study for tests independently. With test anxiety on the rise and increasing pressure to perform academically, many children are less confident in their ability to study effectively and make the grade. As panic ensues, kids are turning to their parents, who must re-learn chemistry and calculus right alongside with their kids so they can provide late-night support as they cram for an exam—together. This can be extremely frustrating and stressful for both children and parents. It can also foster an unhealthy dependency wherein the child feels he is unable to perform well without the parent being involved every step of the way. Being available for support—such

as proofreading a paper or quizzing your child on quick test facts—can be helpful and comforting. When your children's academic needs go beyond that, encourage them to seek help from their teachers, guidance counselors, tutors, or classmates. Learning to access resources and ask for help are vital life skills that your children will develop when taking charge of their workload. Studying independently will also build feelings of self-confidence, which will ultimately be reflected in academic and other successes.

Resolving Conflicts

Resist the urge to jump in and solve your child's peer problems. Learning to resolve conflict is a major developmental task and a necessary social skill at all stages of life. Parents who rush in to defend their child or facilitate an apology actually do their child a disservice by denying her the opportunity to work through the issues with her friend independently. Make yourself available to listen to your child's difficulties, provide support, and brainstorm possible ideas for next steps. But ultimately have her put the steps into motion herself. This will not only empower your child and build social confidence, but will encourage her to take responsibility for her role in both the onset and the resolution of conflicts.

Wake-Up Call

In my experience (both personal and professional), morning routine seems to be the most universally painful time of day for parents and children. Getting kids out of bed, into the shower, through breakfast, and out the door on time, all while getting yourself ready for the day, can be a task of gargantuan proportion. In an effort to minimize stress and avoid those dreaded late slips, parents can easily fall into the habit of walking their kids through the morning to-do list each day, beginning with begging and pleading with their child to *pleeeeeease just get UP!* Gone seem to be the days of alarm clocks doing the job; they've been replaced by parents desperate to be on time. Once the child is mercifully out of bed, next come the every-two-minute checks to make sure he is dressed, brushing his teeth, brushing his hair, can find his sneakers, and has eaten something, all the while counting down the minutes until the bus will arrive. Parent-child conflicts occur often in those early hours (who doesn't love a good power struggle at 6:30 A.M.?!), setting the tone for the entire day. In the spirit of parting ways for the day on a pleasant note, parents and children should engage in open communication about timelines and expectations for morning routine, and parents can use this opportunity to encourage independence and self-care. If your child tends to be easily distracted while completing tasks, visual aids such as checklists, reminder notes, or picture cues can be helpful in prompting the child through his routine and enabling the parent to take a step back. Completing morning routine independently can foster a strong sense of competence in children, and—a bonus—eliminate early morning power struggles.

As parents, one of our most difficult tasks is learning to let go and allow our children to sink or swim on their own. In the process of loving and caring, we often overreach, overprotect, and overparent, when, in fact, one of the most loving gestures we can make is to encourage self-reliance and help our children grow up independent, healthy, and confident.

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