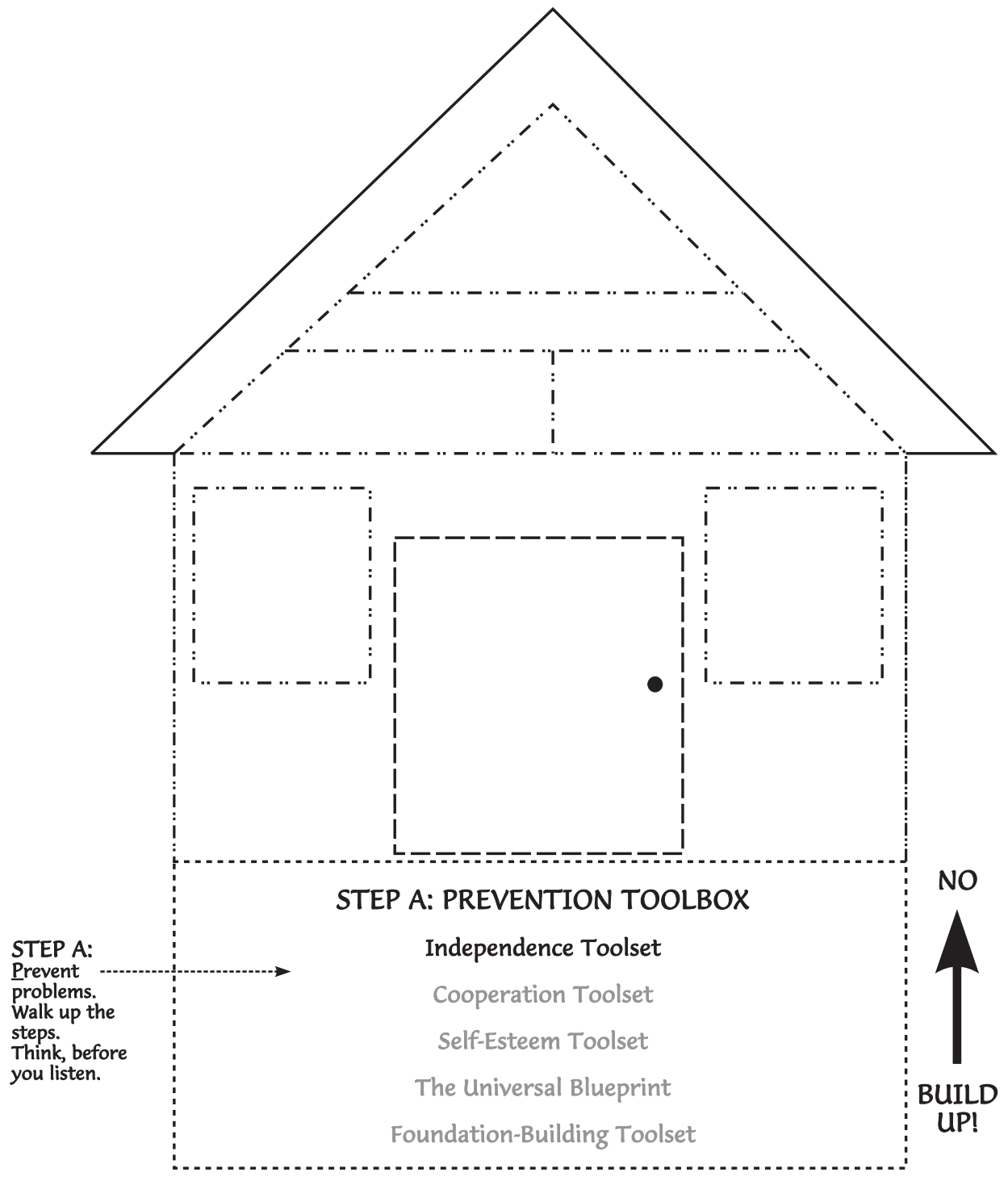


CHAPTER 6

INDEPENDENCE TOOLSET



CHAPTER

6 INDEPENDENCE TOOLSET

We want our house to have the features and internal supports it needs to stand independently. We might use temporary supports, but our ultimate goal is to have a house that stands on its own and is strong enough to weather storms. If our children ask to help build the house, what should we do? Tell the children to leave? Wait until they learn the skills before we let them practice? Let them watch? Explain how to use the tools? Let them try simple steps?

Similarly, our ultimate parenting goal is to build internal qualities within our children so they are strong enough to independently weather the storms in their lives. To do this, children need to know how to do certain tasks and adopt helpful behaviors and values. Parents need to teach children these important life skills and let them practice using the skills by gradually increasing their freedom and responsibilities. This maintains a healthy balance that gives children room to grow and to separate from their parents in healthy ways.

IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter encourages us to consider three important ideas about independence:

1. Parents *and* children can resist responsibility and block children's need for more independence.
2. There is a delicate balance between expanding limits and teaching skills so children can responsibly manage their increasing freedom.
3. Parents can use specific tools to foster responsibility and self-sufficiency.

WHEN TO USE THIS TOOLSET




We often think of independence when talking about young children, who are learning skills for the first time, and teens, who are on the brink of adulthood. In reality, we foster independence every day, from birth through adulthood. Every day, month, and year we have many opportunities to teach values such as responsibility and allow our children to practice the life skills they need as adults. Therefore, we constantly use these skills *with* children and *teach* the same skills *to* children.

THE BALANCE OF INDEPENDENCE

Parents may hinder their children's independence because they have difficulty letting go or are afraid the children will make mistakes. Our job is not to control children or do things *for* them, but to teach them to be self-responsible. We face a constant balancing act of guiding our children without demanding so much control that we get into power struggles with them. To build independence, we need to deal with our children's power and control issues *and* our own.

The key to healthy independence is to teach skills while expanding limits, staying one step ahead of our children's abilities.

Using the symbols we learned in the Foundation-Building Toolset, we can illustrate this delicate balancing act and the imbalances that can occur.

Zigzag = child's skills and abilities Circle = parent's limits and child's freedom		
 <p>Over-Controlling</p>	 <p>Under-Controlling</p>	 <p>Balanced</p>
<p>Children have the skills, but little freedom to use them. They resent these unreasonable limits and push for more freedom.</p> <p><i>Parents believe:</i> “When he has the skills, I’ll give him the freedom.”</p>	<p>Children have few skills and too much freedom. They can’t handle the freedom responsibly.</p> <p><i>Parents believe:</i> “When I give him the freedom, he’ll develop the skills.”</p>	<p>As children increase their skills, parents expand the limits, staying one step ahead. Balance is maintained, so children can handle the freedom responsibly.</p> <p><i>Parents believe:</i> “I must provide enough freedom for my child to grow and practice the skills I am teaching.”</p>

It takes more time, patience, and skill to foster healthy independence, but there are many positive benefits. As children learn more skills, we don’t have to do so many things *for* children, remind them as often, and feel frustrated with their slowness. Children learn skills that help them throughout their lives—as youngsters, teens, and as adults. Children who learn they can do things on their own develop self-confidence. We feel more trusting when our children are away from us, because we know they have the knowledge and skills to avoid or effectively deal with potential problems.

DEVELOPING RESPONSIBILITY

Most parents include “responsibility” in the list of qualities they want their children to develop. Often, however, the definition of responsibility and how to achieve it are unclear. When most people think of responsibility, they think of chores. Actually, there are three kinds of responsibility.

1. **Personal responsibility**—being responsible *for* and *to ourselves*.
 - a. Self-care (getting dressed, personal hygiene).
 - b. Taking care of our own property (keeping room clean, treating belongings with respect).
 - c. Making decisions and choices.
 - d. Being responsible for the consequences of decisions (admitting mistakes, making amends).
2. **General responsibility**—being responsible *to the family* and *society*.
 - a. Contributing to the daily operation of the family (setting the table) or society (peaceful conflict resolution).
 - b. Helping without being asked (emptying the trash when we see it is full, replacing the toilet paper when we use the last piece).
3. **Specific responsibility**—being responsible *for specific tasks*.
 - a. Accepting chore/job assignments that include ongoing or one-time tasks with or without payment. These tasks are performed within school/work schedules and within reasonable quality guidelines.

We can't wait until our children reach adulthood to begin transferring responsibility to them. Children mature when they learn to accept increasing responsibility for their choices and actions. Many adults, however, struggle with their own response-ability.

Response-ability is the ability to accept the consequences of the choices we make.

We all know people, adults and children alike, who avoid responsibility. It's natural to want to be right. It's more difficult to admit when we are wrong, make a mistake, or to respond to blame and criticism. So we try to justify our failures and mistakes, giving away our personal power and self-responsibility in the process. To teach our children responsibility, we need to model it.

A Personal Story. *A co-worker entered my office to apologize for something she did that could have upset me. She asked for my forgiveness. I didn't remember her doing anything and wasn't the least bit upset. I was quite impressed by the inner strength it took for her to accept responsibility for her actions and the possible consequences. I decided, then and there, that I wanted to have the kind of integrity it took to own up to my mistakes and earn respect from others. It isn't easy. I'm often tempted to defend myself or blame others, but try to accept responsibility for my actions whenever I can.*

No one can avoid making choices, but our attitude toward the *consequences* of our choices shows whether we are responsible. If the consequence is positive, we know how to make a similar choice in the future. If the consequence is negative, we can learn from the experience and choose better next time. This is how children and adults learn and grow. Being a role model and teaching responsibility through our responses is sometimes surprisingly effective.

A Graduate's Story. *I told my six-year-old daughter to give me something for safekeeping. I assured her I would keep track of it. Later, when she asked for it, I searched the house, but couldn't find it anywhere! I said, "Maybe when Dad gets home we can ask him if he's seen it." My daughter replied, "Mom, it was **your** responsibility, not Dad's."*

*I was taken aback, being put in my place by a six-year-old, but was more impressed by her understanding of the need to accept responsibility for one's actions and mistakes. I responded, "You're right. It **was** my responsibility. I'll keep looking until I find it." Looking back, my daughter might have done a better job keeping track of it in the first place!*

Sometimes, a child's irresponsible behavior is really just a difference in priorities. A **preschooler's** creativity and desire to play is often incompatible with our expectations for neatness and organization. A fort, still in progress, can look like an abandoned mess of blocks. A tired child might conveniently drop books on the floor, because he's supposed to stay in bed. Neatness is a gradual process that evolves with age and a change in priorities. We need to keep our expectations realistic, teach skills, offer encouragement when they improve, and hold them accountable when they forget.

Older children, especially **teens**, can have different priorities from their parents. Neat children sometimes turn into messy teens, as their priorities change to issues more important than cleaning: career goals, friends, romance, trying on identities, and keeping up with busy schedules. We can focus on the skills they are learning and qualities they are developing, even if they are not the particular skills or means of learning that we would choose for them.

A Group Discussion Story. *A mother in one of my parenting classes was concerned about her teenage son's involvement in a body-building competition. As the day of the final competition approached, he became more focused on his training. One evening when it was time to attend his teen group at the Jewish Community Center, he chose to miss the group rather than skip his workout. His mother was concerned that his priorities **might** be on the wrong track. She was afraid he **might** be more concerned with a beautiful body than socializing with his friends. She worried that he **might** start wanting others to accept him for his body, rather than his mind and personality. She thought he **might** be obsessed with the competition. (I emphasize the word "might," because she was assuming this and had not checked out these perceptions with her son.)*

*The other parents in the class knew the parent and her teen. They pointed out some positive lessons her son was learning from the competition. They saw that part of her conflict was that she didn't value body-building and felt the teen group should be a priority. Her son seemed to feel that, during the competition, his workout should take priority over socializing. The other parents didn't think he was being obsessive about the competition, since he wasn't using steroids or neglecting his home and school responsibilities. Had he already worked out that day, he probably **would** have attended the teen group.*

*Another parent asked her, "If you had a work project, were behind on your deadline, and were invited to a party, would you miss the party to fulfill your commitment?" The mother could see that, in his own way, he **was** being responsible and self-disciplined. She started seeing the lessons her son was learning, although he was learning them through an activity she didn't value.*

Attaching Privileges to Responsibilities

Many children earn their privileges through responsible behavior. This is a valuable approach which can motivate children to accept responsibility or explain why a parent denies or restricts a privilege. (We will explore restrictions more in Chapter 13, "Discipline Toolset.") Parents need to be careful, however, that they don't use privileges as bribes or to control children.

***A Graduate's Story.** My teenage son is so irresponsible. His idea of summer break is to sleep until noon, watch TV, and hang out with his friends. He argues with us every time we ask him to do chores and then turns around and wants us to grant him privileges we don't think he's ready for. When we say, "No," he compares himself to his older sister, who is in college. For example, he wants his own car and points out that we purchased a car for our daughter when she graduated from high school. I told him that we will purchase a car for him, too, when he shows us he can handle the extra responsibilities that go along with having a car: a job to drive to that would provide money to pay for gas, repairs, and insurance.*

Recently, we had an argument about what he was going to do with his life. I own a business and he said he would just work for me, assuming that when I'm ready to retire I would pass the business on to him. I told him, "When I retire, I will sell my business to the person whom I think will manage it the best. Whoever the person is, he (or she) will have a college degree, so I know he has the self-discipline to work hard for his accomplishments. If you happen to be interested and qualified, I will consider selling the business to you—but not just because you are my son. You would have to meet the same requirements as anyone else who wants to buy it.

This son is focusing only on the privileges, a car or employment in the family business. The father is focusing on the internal qualities necessary to *earn* those privileges. The father provides opportunities for his son to develop responsible driving behavior whenever he lends his car to his son. His son can develop responsible work habits when he does chores at home or with his school work. It is the son's choice whether to take advantage of these opportunities. The father did not use the privileges as bribes. He simply detailed the conditions under which the son could obtain the privilege.

Parents can send the message, "When you have chosen to handle your current privileges responsibly (and detailing what this means), I will know you are ready for more privileges." There is a delicate balance here, however, and parents frequently set up no-win situations for their children. They say the child isn't responsible in a particular area, but don't provide opportunities to develop that responsible behavior. Or they say children must show the ability before giving any level of the privilege. This is similar to the experience of applying for our first job or when starting a new career. The employer says, "Sorry, you don't have enough experience." But you can't get experience if no one is willing to hire you!

ALLOWANCES

Allowances are a controversial practice for developing responsibility. Some parents view allowance as a privilege children earn, while others view it as each family member's right.

When parents pay children for chores, children often do the chore only for the money, not to help as a family member. Consequently, money is the value, not cooperation. Then, if parents ask the child to do an extra job or accept more responsibility, the child may ask, "How much will I get for it?" Soon, the parent becomes a labor negotiator, paying increasing amounts of money just to get basic chores done. If children don't complete a chore and don't care about money, the chore still doesn't get done. (Yes, there really are children who don't care about money, especially if someone uses it to control them.)

Parents want their children to learn that jobs can earn money, since that's the way the real world works. There are many jobs in the real world, however, that require work without pay. (Do you get paid for washing your dishes or doing the family's laundry? If so, I want to live in your house!)

Allowances and chores each teach life skills.

- **Allowances can teach money management:** how to earn, save, budget, and prioritize purchases.
- **Chores can teach cooperation and responsibility:** pitching in as a member of the family, following through on agreements, and doing quality work.

Separately, each is a valuable teaching tool. When combined, problems often arise.

Three-level Allowance Plan

Parents can meet their goals for teaching responsibility, money management, and cooperation, without negative side effects, by following a three-level plan for chores and allowances.

- **Level 1: Base allowance.** Give a base allowance for money management purposes. If children don't manage their money, let them experience the consequences. Children often spend their money carelessly for a couple of months. If parents don't criticize or rescue them when they run out of money, children usually realize they must save their money for nicer purchases and naturally change their spending habits.

Have children do base chores simply because they are part of the family to make the household run more smoothly. Do not connect their base allowance with their base chores. If they do not do their base chores, they can experience a loss of a social privilege, not money. This teaches the value of work-before-play. Level 1 chores might include making one's own lunch, keeping one's room neat, and a regular chore such as vacuuming or dusting. Chores such as doing the dishes or setting the dinner table can rotate among family members. The effects of not doing these chores are logical: no lunch that day, unable to have friends in the house because it's too messy, not eating until the table is set, and no cooking until the previous meal's dishes are clean. (We'll learn more about discipline in Chapter 13, "Discipline Toolset.")

- **Level 2: Earning more money.** Children can earn extra money if they accept additional responsibilities beyond self-care and base chores. These chores are usually more difficult or need to be done less often than daily chores. Level 2 chores might include laundry, weeding, washing windows or cars, and mowing the lawn.
- **Level 3: Saving for purchases.** If children want to save money for a large purchase, they can do Level 3 jobs. These are large, one-time or several-times-a-year chores such as cleaning a closet, raking leaves, or helping a parent with a large project like landscaping or painting. Since Level 2 and 3 chores teach children the value of earning money through increased responsibilities, consider having children do chores for relatives or neighbors. This will prevent extra money always coming out of your pocket.

***A Personal Story.** A note about allowances and credit—use caution. Chris had been asking for a video game system for several years. I was philosophically opposed to them and really couldn't afford such an expensive purchase. Chris was not much of a saver, so I suggested a compromise. If he saved half the cost, I'd pay the rest. I assumed he would probably not reach*

the goal, but this was the motivator Chris needed to discipline himself to save. He volunteered for extra jobs, but I often didn't have the extra cash to pay him. He knew it would be too tempting to have the cash anyway, so I agreed to record what he had earned. When he finally earned half the cost of the system and his birthday was near, I could not put off the purchase any longer. In the end, I still had to foot the whole bill and he only had to do extra work but not actually save anything. I learned my lesson the hard way and stopped all credit plans. Now, my children have to decide if they want something enough not only to do extra work but also resist the temptation to spend the money they are saving.

Budgeting Options

The amount of an allowance depends on what children need to buy with it. Parents' budgets may be such that parents could give larger allowances, but overindulging children robs them of the experience of saving. When children receive their allowance, they can divide it into budget categories. Experts and parents hold differing opinions about *making* children budget their money or allowing them to freely spend it. Older children want to be in control of their own money. If parents suggest new budget requirements, it often leads to power struggles. If parents establish budget requirements when children are young, they get used to the routine, but still might resist this control as they grow older. You'll need to test this plan and decide whether mandatory budgeting works for your family. If you decide to try it, consider the following budget items. Involve children in choosing the categories and percentages they will contribute:

- Charitable donations such as religious offerings.
- Long-term savings.
- A family fun fund. Family members contribute to a general fund that is used for special outings.
- Free spending money.

Some parents provide *saving incentives*. For example, the parents match any money the child saves or they pay interest on the total savings balance. The parents might only require the children to put a small percentage of their allowance in long-term savings, but the incentive offers a bonus if children save more. It is still each child's choice to save. While this plan works for many families, I've heard horror stories of parents going broke so money-hungry children can increase their bank accounts without having to do any extra work. Think about the long term money figures you might have to pay as your children's savings increase. Also consider teaching your children about investment options that could increase their bank accounts without breaking yours. **Beware, once you start a saving incentive plan, it can be addictive like any other bribe or incentive plan.** Money is power, so use caution or it can rule (and ruin) your family.

***A Graduate's Story.** My sister is divorced and her children live alternate weeks at her ex-husband's house. She and her ex-husband are caught in a vicious cycle of trying to outdo each other. They each take the children on expensive vacations and give the children expensive gifts like VCRs, camcorders, and computers. To encourage her children to save, my sister started a savings incentive program; whatever the children save, she puts half that amount in the savings account. This policy applies to any money the children get—allowances, gifts from relatives, and job earnings. Not to be outdone, the father agreed to also contribute half the amount to the savings account they keep at his house (they must use this money to buy items they use at his house). It doesn't matter which account the children make their deposit to; each parent will add half that amount to the savings account the child keeps at that house. These kids get a 100% return on their money! If they deposit Grandpa's \$100 Christmas check, they get a total of \$100 from their parents. Whatever they deposit automatically doubles!*

These children are nice, sharing, good kids caught in the middle of this competition. My nine-year-old niece even said to me, "I'll be able to buy a Volvo when I'm sixteen!" These parents are caught in a trap that is very unhealthy for their children, but neither will stop because it would make them look bad. Although the children are learning how to save money, they are also learning how to be more manipulative.

Whatever allowance plan you choose, it is best to decide or change family-wide plans in a family council meeting. Here, the entire family can weigh the options, decide the details and consequences, and get a commitment to the plan from *everyone*. (See Chapter 14, "Family Council Toolset.") You can also use one-on-one problem solving. (See Chapter 8, "Problem-Solving Toolset.") If only parents decide and enforce allowance and chore plans, it turns chores and money into bargaining chips, which usually leads to more power struggles.

INDEPENDENCE TOOLS

There are some basic tools we use to build independence, but the independence issues differ greatly at each developmental stage. While we can't address all ages and issues, use these guidelines and suggestions to get ideas for applying the tools to your child's individual needs or issues.



Openly Model Behavior ☆☆☆☆

When we model behavior, we simply "practice what we preach" through observable behavior. *Openly* modeling behavior is particularly useful for internal (logical or emotional) processes that are difficult for children to directly observe. When we openly model behavior, we make these internal processes something the child can *hear and see*, usually by talking our way through the steps we normally take in our mind. This way, children can learn the steps to take in their own minds when responding to similar situations.

For example, if children often respond to frustrating situations in aggressive ways, we can talk aloud to ourselves when *we* are frustrated, knowing a "sponge" is soaking up what we say. When another driver cuts us off in traffic and we say nothing, children assume that nothing happened. What actually happened was a very quick, but internal process of experiencing a rush of frustration and aggravation, talking ourselves through our feelings, and deciding not to say or do anything about it. This inside process is what we want to say aloud, not *to* our children, but *to ourselves in front of* them, for their benefit. We might say out loud, "Geez! I can't believe that guy just cut in front of me! That was dangerous! I feel like honking my horn or calling him a name. But that won't help me or him. I just need to take a deep breath and calm down. Maybe he's in a rush to get somewhere and isn't thinking about what he's doing." By revealing our internal thoughts, our children have a model to follow the next time they need to talk themselves through a frustrating situation.



Teach Skills ☆☆☆☆

If we do too much for children, they miss opportunities to learn how to do these things for themselves. If we teach them skills instead, they learn independence. It's like the old saying, "***Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach him to fish and he'll eat for life.***"

In the past, children had many opportunities to learn independence and responsibility. Parents and children worked side-by-side, feeding animals and planting crops. Today, children still need to work *with* their parents, receiving on-the-job training while contributing to the family.

The ideal time to teach skills is when children are young, but it's never too late. We *can* teach older children "new tricks," but it's harder to break bad habits than to prevent them. We need to be patient and to understand our children's surprise at their new duties or our sudden unwillingness to do things for them.

When teaching children values, tasks, or behavior, there are ten tips we can follow. We don't have to use all ten suggestions every time or use them in the order they are listed below. When teaching difficult skills or children are hesitant, we can use more tools. If we take the extra time to work together and teach skills, both parents and children can benefit.

1. **Plan Ahead.** Make a mental note that your child needs to work on a particular skill. Set aside a time when you won't feel rushed and can spend time teaching your child. Other times you will "teach on the fly," looking for teachable moments as they arise.

2. **Explain the value the skill has for the child, the family, others, or society.** What is the benefit of learning this skill? Acknowledge that your children might not share your values, such as tidiness.
3. **Break the task into smaller steps.** Do the task one step at a time or concentrate on the different skills you use to do the task. Offer suggestions for safety, quality, and convenience as you explain each step.
4. **Let children watch.** If this is the first time you are teaching your children a skill, show them *how* to perform the skill, explaining slowly as you do it.
5. **Let children try.** Let children practice the skill while you watch for safety and quality assurance. Don't hover, pressuring children. Instead, sit back and watch with patience and encouragement. Or you can work on a related task, keeping an eye on them and offering helpful hints as you go along. Your children's efforts will probably be imperfect. Instead of pointing out inadequacies or rescuing children when they are discouraged, remind them that it takes practice and time to improve.
6. **Let children do things their way.** The result does not have to be perfect; it just needs to meet your bottom line. Children might find a way that's better for them. Don't insist on perfection or expect it to look the way it looks when you do it. Just let them try their best and get practice. Avoid the urge to step in, out of impatience, and do it for them or "show them the right way." Coach and teach instead. In fact, if your children devise a unique way of doing a task, ask them to teach *you!* This is a real confidence booster and helps them learn teaching skills.

***A Personal Story.** After teaching Amber, who was 7, how to clean the bathrooms, she took pride in doing the task alone. She would shut the bathroom door and instruct everyone to stay out. Once, she accidentally splashed water all over her shirt, which then stuck to her body. She asked me to help her take it off. When it got stuck on her head, we both laughed. She decided to keep her new "hat" on while finishing the job. It really didn't matter that she was half-naked while in the bathroom alone. What mattered was that she kept working. The next time she cleaned, she pulled her shirt onto her head and made her "cleaning hat," which was part of her cleaning "routine" for several months. Whenever I saw her in her "cleaning hat" and carrying a bottle of bathroom cleaner I knew she was busy working.*

7. **Offer choices.** Encourage your children to take ownership of the task. They will be more willing to do something if they feel *they* are doing it, rather than following someone's specific directions.
8. **Work together.** As children learn skills, work together as a team. Do one part while your children do another part. Let them bring their work to where you are, if they can. (For example, they can get dressed where you are or make their lunch while you fix breakfast.) This provides more opportunities for descriptive encouragement and offering helpful tips.

Be careful if you have older children teaching younger children as apprentices. Older children are often easily frustrated with younger siblings, have unrealistic expectations, or give younger children an unfair share of the work. If *you* work with your children it provides many rich memories and opportunities to learn more about their thoughts, motivations, and interests. It also provides more chances to give positive attention and have quality one-on-one time. Only allow older children to teach younger siblings if they will be respectful, encouraging, and patient.

You may be trying to develop behaviors or establish habits, such as better anger control or healthier eating habits. Share *your* desire to work on these things and the value the new skill will have for you or others. Invite your children to join you in your efforts. "I'm going to work on this . . . do you want to join me so we can support each other?" Don't tell them to join you, simply invite them and let them choose. If your children choose to join you, make these times together a rewarding experience. Share your frustrations, triumphs, and challenges with each other. Most of all, support and encourage each other.

9. **Make it fun.** Play music, dance, sing a song, or make a game of it. Do not, however, race or compete, since these pressure children and there is always a loser. (See the section on competition, pages 101–103 in Chapter 4, “Self-Esteem Toolset.”) No one has to *win*, be the fastest, or do the “best” job. If you can use your children’s interests (e.g., music, sports) to teach the skill, your children will be more interested in learning.

Another variation is to make the task more **child-friendly**. When you are doing something dangerous or requiring a high level of skill, find ways children can imitate you in an age-appropriate, safe way. For example, when you are painting, give them a paintbrush and let them paint with water on the sidewalk or with paint on another section of a wall. Give your children toy tools or safe adult ones and let them practice on sample projects. If buying toys is not an option, use your creativity to find other safe ways for your children to help.

10. **Offer encouragement at every step.** Describe your children’s efforts and progress. Avoid words like *good* or *perfect*. (Remember what we learned in Chapter 4, “Self-Esteem Toolset”?)

We can apply the “teaching skills” tool to physical tasks, appropriate behavior, or values, since these are all learned skills. Let’s look at one common example of each:

TEACHING A PHYSICAL TASK

Organizing Belongings

- *Plan Ahead.* Figure out *why* children are disorganized. Are they overwhelmed by too many toys? Do they lack convenient places to put things? Are they easily distracted? Is cleaning at the bottom of their priority list? Is organization simply not part of their personality? Once we identify the cause, we can adjust our approach. Plan a special time to de-clutter, make shelves with boxes, or think about ways your children can build self-reminders into their plans.
- *Explain the value of the skill.* Acknowledge the difficulty of being organized and that it doesn’t come naturally to most people. Show understanding for their lack of interest. Point out the benefits of being more organized—we find things quicker, the floor is safe to walk on, and toys won’t get broken. If they pick up toys regularly, it doesn’t take as much time to organize and clean, which leaves more time to play.
- *Break the task into smaller steps.* Make the job easier by classifying objects and discussing options for organizing their belongings. Avoid vague commands like, “Clean up this mess,” which is overwhelming. The child looks at the mess and wonders, “Where do I start?” Instead, focus on one area at a time, “You could start by putting the books in the bookshelf.” This statement gives some direction to get children started. Don’t teach all the steps in one session. This gives children a chance to remember what they have learned before learning something new.
- *Let children watch.* The first time you sort the toys, do it with them and explain as you go along. For example, say “book” (as you slide the book toward the bookshelf), “pencil” (as you toss it near the desk). Do a couple items from each category and invite them to help.
- *Let children try.* Help children decide where to put miscellaneous items. If they get distracted and start to play with a toy, ask “Where does that go?” This helps them refocus.
- *Let children do it their way.* It doesn’t really matter *how* a child cleans, as long as it is safe, fairly quick, and effective. They can roller skate to the different locations, use a robot-hand toy to lift items, or put a basketball hoop over their clothes hampers to make that task more fun.
- *Offer choices.* “Do you want to pick up the toys or dirty clothes first?” “You can to start at one end of the room and put away each thing you find or make piles before you put them away. You decide.”
- *Work together, gradually doing less each time.* Offer to do one group of items while your children choose another. Eventually, you can work on another chore at the same time. It is

always preferable to do *some* kind of work, instead of relaxing with a book, because children feel alone and resentful. Working at the same time, even if not together, promotes teamwork.

- *Make it fun and child-friendly.* In addition to singing and making games out of a job, look at the room from your children's perspective. Can they easily reach everything? The more accessible you make their rooms, the less you will have to help in the future.
- *Offer encouragement at every step.* When your children are busy working or when you check on them, describe the progress they've made and how hard they're working. When children get distracted, keep your comments to one-word reminders or a few words. (See Chapter 10, "Clear Communication Toolset," for specific suggestions.)

TOO MANY TOYS?

- Organize toy storage and play areas at least twice a year. Involve children in identifying broken and outgrown toys.
- Plan a garage sale. Let children keep any money they make from selling their toys. This motivates them to let go of a toy. Remind them that they can buy new toys with the money they earn.
- Clean out toys before gift-giving holidays. Remind children that they need more room to store their new gifts. Suggest they give their old toys to needy children.

If children don't want to give up their toys:

- Have children select certain toys to box and rotate boxes every one to three months.
- Instead of rotating entire boxes of toys, some parents have a one-in-one-out rule. For every toy children want to take out, they need to trade one in.

If children never play with a toy, they may not be as upset about getting rid of it. If they do play with it, let them keep it and get agreements for putting it away. (If this doesn't work, there are other options, in later chapters, for getting children to clean after themselves.)

*If children are attached to their toys, **never** sneak and throw it out.* If children don't want to give an outgrown toy to a younger sibling or neighbor, make the donation a ceremonial event.

- Reminisce about the fond memories children have about their toys and how sad it is that they've outgrown them.
- Explain how much another child would appreciate the toy.
- Offer the choice of giving the toy directly to another child or offer to pass it on for them. Sometimes, putting a toy up for a short time can help make a transition of ownership easier for the child who's giving.

TEACHING BEHAVIOR SKILLS

Assertive Respectful Communication

- *Plan Ahead.* We notice children need to work on this behavior when they respond to people in passive or disrespectful ways. We usually teach this skill "on the fly," as situations arise, leaning down to whisper our comments and suggestions, so we don't embarrass children in front of others.
- *Explain the value of the skill.* Disrespectful or rude behavior causes problems in relationships and leads to arguments and hurt feelings. If children are shy or afraid to speak for themselves, others may take advantage of them or not realize what they want or need. Assertive communication, as we learn in Chapter 10, "Clear Communication Toolset," is speaking out for one's rights, without violating another's. It resolves problems in healthy, helpful ways that improve relationships.

- *Break the task into smaller steps.* There are several steps to assertive communication. For children, we can help them work on several areas: realizing what they want, having the courage to speak out, and wording requests, opinions, or concerns in respectful, clear ways. Teach children the language of assertiveness. We learn this in more depth in the Clear Communication Toolset.
- *Let children watch.* When you complain about poor service or respond to a rude comment, practice respectful, assertive communication. Afterward, share with children how difficult it was to control your anger, think before speaking, and how you talk yourself through the experience (self-talk to control your anger and speak respectfully). We simply share our experience as we would if we were talking to ourselves or a friend who happened to be with us.
- *Let children try.* Provide opportunities for children to practice speaking out and making requests in non-threatening situations. Give older children or teens a chance to change their rude or disrespectful comments, instead of reacting to them in equally aggressive or disrespectful ways. Let them know they are certainly allowed to have negative feelings and opinions, but you (and others) are more willing to listen to them if they express those ideas respectfully.
- *Let children do it their way.* Children don't have to word things exactly as we do, although they tend to mimic what they hear. As long as children are speaking out for their needs or opinions without offending others, they can develop their own personal style of communication.
- *Offer choices.* When we brainstorm ideas for responding to conflicts, discuss the options and possible effects of each. You will learn more about this problem-solving process in Chapter 8.
- *Work together.* As children become more skilled at assertive communication, stand further in the background, giving them space. If children are hesitant to speak to others, offer to go with them, but they must speak for themselves. Assure them that if the cashier asks them a question they aren't expecting, you will coach them, but will not speak *for* them.
- *Make it fun and child-friendly.* Role-play possible scenarios. With young children, play store and practice being polite and responding to small-talk. Play restaurant; when children are the waiters, share a concern about your food in a respectful way and then reverse roles. Play with character figures; when they get into conflicts, model and encourage children to practice respectful responses and alternatives to fighting, which is usually how children make their characters resolve problems.
- *Offer encouragement at every step.* When children try their new skills, others sometimes respond unhelpfully or unpredictably. At this point, many children (and adults) throw their skills out the window and revert to power and control tactics, like grabbing a toy or shoving a child in anger. Give them credit for their effort and describe any improvement you see. Do some brief problem solving (see Chapter 8) to plan possible responses they can use if this happens again. Carefully consider whether you should discipline the aggressive action, if they gave their assertive communication skills a fair try and are still in the process of learning (a PU problem). You will probably be more effective if you use the experience to teach skills, rather than simply punishing them for trying and failing.

***A Personal Story.** When my children were young, both were hesitant to talk to adults. I remember one summer my son offered another child money, if she would buy candy for him at the pool's refreshment stand. I immediately nixed that idea! We rehearsed his request, but he still refused to speak, even when I stood by him! It was embarrassing and frustrating, as the line of hungry children grew longer. Since the pool was a small, safe place and I could watch him from afar, I finally told him that if he wanted candy at the pool, he would need to buy it himself. I didn't rescue him or allow his friends to bail him out. Finally, he did it. Each time after that, he seriously considered how much he wanted something. Over time, he became more skilled and confident about speaking up for himself. By his early teens he was regularly handling tasks like placing orders, calling stores for inquiries, and making purchases on his own.*

TEACHING VALUES

(For general information about teaching values see Chapter 10, “Clear Communication Toolset.”)

Appreciating Diversity

- *Plan Ahead.* There are countless opportunities everyday to teach children an appreciation for diversity. We see people in our community, on television, or in public who are “different”—people with physical or mental challenges and from different races, cultures, and religions. Children naturally ask questions, but sometimes at awkward times or in loud embarrassing ways, like “Why is that kid in a chair with wheels?” Tell children they can ask you any question or make any comment, but they need to whisper it in your ear or wait until you are alone. Let them know you understand their curiosity and explain that some comments hurt other people’s feelings.
- *Explain the value of the skill.* It is natural for people to compare others to themselves; we see ourselves as the norm and anyone different seems “abnormal,” until we understand, respect, and appreciate these differences. Intolerance for people’s differences is the root of many world conflicts. In our own lives, we can benefit from learning how to get along with others who are different. We acknowledge the differences, instead of *denying* they are there. If we get to know people as individuals, appreciating their unique talents, skills, or qualities, we avoid prejudging people and break common stereotypes.
- *Break the task into smaller steps.* The different steps in appreciating diversity are understanding the causes of the differences, knowing how to accept differences and use them to enhance relationships, and tactful ways to treat others who are different—with the same dignity and respect we need to give *everyone*.
- *Let children watch.* Openly model respect for diversity. If you are surprised, offended, or uncomfortable with someone because of their differences, model respectful behavior toward them. If children ask questions, discuss your feelings. Reveal to them your first impressions and thoughts, which might be negative, how you came to understand more about the person or their differences, and how (or why) you responded respectfully. Thoughts are not observable, unless we share them. Sharing our thoughts helps children know how to respond when they have similar thoughts.
- *Let children try.* Fine-tune children’s skills as situations arise. For example, if children see another child in a wheelchair and whisper to you, “Why is that kid in a wheelchair?” offer a factual explanation, not a label. Say, “His legs probably don’t work well and it’s hard for him to walk.” Don’t say, “He’s handicapped”—physical and mental disabilities are challenges, negative attitudes make them handicaps. Encourage children to smile at the child in a friendly way and say “Hello,” if that is how they would respond to any other child. Encourage children to go beyond distant politeness, befriending other children, regardless of their differences. They should not, however, go out of their way to baby a child with a mental or physical challenge, which is demeaning and implies the child is incapable.
- *Let children do it their way.* As children establish friends of different religions, races, backgrounds, and physical abilities, they will find ways to compensate for any difficulties those differences raise and build a closer relationship. Encourage their efforts and describe how valuable the other child’s relationship is to your children.
- *Offer choices.* When differences pose difficulties (they want to play a computer game with a partially blind child, play on a playground with a physically challenged child, or can’t understand someone who speaks with an accent), explore options for working or playing together. Allow partially blind children to put their nose on the screen, adjust playground equipment to make it more accessible or encourage children to ask the challenged child’s parent for suggestions. Teach children how to ask others for clarification tactfully and respectfully.

- *Work together.* Look for or create opportunities to learn and practice acceptance skills. Volunteer together at a mental or physical rehabilitation clinic, attend services of another religion, and visit playgrounds where there are children of diverse backgrounds.

Diversity in life is the norm. It would be abnormal if everyone were the same.

- *Make it child-friendly.* There are more creative and effective ways to teach values than lecturing: read or tell stories that illustrate the value and ask your child thought-provoking questions. “How did (character’s name) feel when . . .? Why did (character’s name) do . . .?” Role-play situations, “What would you do if someone . . .?” Play games that develop values such as honesty, good sportsmanship, teamwork, and respect for other people’s feelings. With diversity, describe differences to young children in simple, factual, accepting ways.
- *Offer encouragement at every step.* When children make efforts to be respectful, accepting, and helpful to others (whether or not they are “different”), describe how good that can make the other person feel. If they don’t talk down to a physically/mentally challenged person or treat them differently, point out how much that person probably appreciates their friendliness. When they control their stares and nonverbal reactions, notice their efforts and the positive effect. Encourage mostly during the early years or stages of the learning process, to reinforce children’s efforts. Once these attitudes and behaviors are their natural way of perceiving others, don’t point out others’ differences or children’s reactions, since that would only draw more attention to the differences.

A Personal Story. When Amber was 4, she asked why her friend’s skin tanned so darkly and hers stayed so light (she’s a redhead). I explained that everyone’s skin has a different amount of pigment, a chemical that makes skin lighter or darker. I gave her several examples. Referring to our neighbor who has albinism, I explained, “Byron has no pigment, so his skin and hair are very white. You have more pigment, but not much. Emmy has olive-colored skin, so she has more pigment than you, and Barry (an African-American child in her class) has even more pigment.” Amber wondered why people aren’t all the same. I offered both a scientific and spiritual explanation. (Sunnier climates develop more pigment, so our ancestry determines our skin color, and God created us each to be special and unique.) I explained that even though people might look or act different, we are all very similar on the inside—we are all children of God and are deserving of love and respect. We all have feelings that can be hurt, want to feel accepted by others, and want to have friends.

Byron, our neighbor, has severe vision problems, so Amber has learned how to modify their play to fit their mutual needs. She points out hazards he might not see. She knows he needs to hold objects closer to his eyes to see them and gives him the extra time he needs to adjust to new situations. He shares his braille books with her and has her close her eyes to test how “sharp her fingers are.” Amber doesn’t overprotect him; she respects and understands he needs to do things in a way that is best for him.



Give a Quick Tip

Offering a quick tip or giving children information is a simple tool for building independence. Present suggestions in a *tentative* way. Don’t *tell* them what to do, simply offer a suggestion they can take or leave. Children can often figure out the information if we ask it as a question. For example:

- ▶ “If you don’t rinse the sink after you spit out your toothpaste, what happens?” (Wait.) “Yeah, the toothpaste dries on the sink and looks yucky.”
- ▶ “Do you know how to save your computer game? If you save your game now and then, you don’t have to go back to the beginning each time.”

Instead of telling children what to *do*, it is often more helpful to give them information they can use later. This should be information they do not already know. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ “When milk is left out too long, it spoils.”

- ▶ “When food is left out, the dog (or ants/bugs) will get into it.”
- ▶ “If you put on your socks first, they’ll stay pulled up when you put on your pants.”

If you’ve found one way of doing things to work well for you, offer your personal style as one possible way to do things. Again, don’t insist that the child has to do it your way, simply point out that it works for you and the child can try the idea. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ “Sometimes I _____. You can do it however you want, but that’s what works best for me.”
- ▶ “Would you like to know a secret?” If they say yes, say, “I usually do _____.” If they say no, let them discover their own best way to do something.
- ▶ “Sometimes it helps me if I do _____.”



Let Children Be Responsible for Their Own Mistakes ☆☆☆☆

Many parents try to help their children avoid mistakes by offering advice or rescue them by stepping in. While we might succeed in protecting our children from pain or mistakes, we might also rob them of self-confidence, a positive attitude toward mistakes, and an opportunity to learn important life skills.

Think about experiences when you learned a valuable lesson. Chances are, you learned the lesson firsthand or directly saw the effects of someone’s mistakes. These firsthand experiences always teach lessons that last longer and have a greater impact than secondhand advice. Whenever a potential mistake is not dangerous, we want to guide children, without taking over or rescuing them.

***A Personal Story.** I am a coach for a worldwide program that teaches children creative problem solving. A team of up to seven children works together to solve problems: one long-term and many on-the-spot problems. The coach’s most important task is to guide the team by asking questions and teaching them skills—we are not allowed to offer **any** ideas, advice, or help. The children must do **everything**: decide the plot, write the script, and make the props. If any team receives outside assistance, the judges will disqualify the team. I use **all** the tools from *The Parent’s Toolshop*, but not interfering is the most difficult. If the team wants to try an idea that probably won’t work, I can only ask questions to help them realize **on their own** whether the idea is worth pursuing. Ultimately, the choice is theirs. “Failure” is an important part of the learning process. It helps the children devise a better solution. This process is more time consuming and frustrating than telling them the answer, but the **process** of allowing children to learn lessons on their own is what’s important. Being a coach for this program also helps me as a parent. When I’m tempted to rescue my children, I am better able to guide them without taking over, too.*

Many people (both adults and children) don’t like to be told what to do, they would rather experience it themselves. When I work with groups of **teens**, they often complain “I wish my parents would let me make my own mistakes. I’m capable of learning from them.” If children make a poor decision that is not life-threatening, let them experience the effects. Later, ask them questions that will help them figure out *for themselves* what to do differently next time. Ask helpful questions, such as “What happened?”, “What did you learn from that?”, “What did you do that worked?”, and “What could you do differently next time?” Use encouragement to point out when they used good judgment or made a responsible decision, no matter how small. We can also help children learn from other people’s mistakes. Discuss news events and ask them questions. “Why do you think this happened? How could it have been avoided? What would you do?”

***A Personal Story.** When I was young, I had red curly hair, which was out of style back then. Other children sometimes made fun of my hair and I always wished I had straighter hair (I even tried ironing it). Once, when I was in elementary school, I had saved up enough money to buy roller skates. My mom took me to the mall and we passed the wig department on the way in. I asked if I could try on one wig, just to see what I would look like. I found a strawberry-blonde, straight-haired wig that was less than the price of the skates. I asked my mother if I could buy the wig with my money. She acknowledged my feelings about wanting to have different hair and pointed out the disadvantages of having a wig and no skates. She did not, however, forbid me from buying it. She suggested we look at skates before I made my decision.*

After looking at the skates, I still wanted to buy the wig. My mom was very hesitant to say "yes." We went back to the wig department so I could try the wig on one more time. As I did, my mom talked to the clerk. She was probably making sure I could return the wig if I changed my mind.

I bought the wig and took it home, excited to wear it for the first time. I left immediately, to show my friends down the street. When I was still two houses away, they realized I was wearing a wig and began to laugh and make fun of me. I turned around and went home. My mom asked me helpful questions about the decision I had made. She provided the option of exchanging the wig for the skates, which is what I did.

My mom could have forbidden me to buy the wig, but I'm glad she didn't. I had always wondered what I would look like with different hair. I was excited about making an independent decision about spending my money. Had she forbidden me to buy the wig, I probably would have gotten into a power struggle with her. Did I make a poor decision? Yes. Was I embarrassed and disappointed? Yes, but only slightly. Mostly, I learned to appreciate the hair God gave me. I learned a lot from making a decision and experiencing the effect, even though it was negative.



Let Children Do Things by Themselves ☆☆☆☆

Parents today are busy and usually in a hurry. It seems easier and faster to do things *for* children, rather than wait for them to do things. If *we* do it, we know it is done the right way (our way). This might be a reflection of our need for control or perfection. While it may be quicker now, in the long run it takes longer to do two people's jobs. Our goal is to teach children life skills and how to use them wisely. We can be supportive and encouraging, giving children chances to practice and improve their skills.

If children take a long time to do tasks on their own, plan ahead by allowing more time. Make things accessible and child-friendly. With young children, for example, put bite-sized chunks of veggies and fruit on a lower refrigerator shelf. Let them make their own snacks, however imperfect. Whatever the age, remember that practice makes better, not perfect.

It's difficult, as children grow older, to realize they don't need us as much. We have mixed feelings about giving up the tasks we gladly do for our children out of love. Acts such as feeding and dressing our children aren't usually difficult to give up. It's much harder, however, to let children solve their own problems, learn from their mistakes and have different opinions. It's hard to see them struggle and make mistakes, when we know we could protect them from pain or disappointment. So we give our advice, sure that we have the answer.

Adults (and older children and siblings) often wait until children are older to teach or involve them in more difficult tasks. Unfortunately, when children are older, they often don't want to help. We've

*Instead of doing tasks **for** children . . .*



. . . make tasks easier for children to do themselves.



missed our chance to teach skills to a younger but more motivated and interested child. Usually, there are small ways young children can help with more difficult tasks.

Sometimes, parents don't realize their efforts to help children actually encourage their dependency or rescue them from responsibilities. Continual reminders to get up, remember coats and books, and eat their food are all ways we take on children's responsibilities. When we protect children from the effects of their mistakes, we prevent them from learning on their own. When we offer advice or tell them how to solve problems, we rob them of important opportunities to learn problem-solving skills. These are just a few ways we keep children dependent, so we can feel indispensable and protect them from disappointment. Dependency creates negative feelings and unhealthy beliefs, such as the following:

Common Statements	Resulting Feelings/Thoughts	Alternative Statement
"Let me do it for you"	Inadequacy. "I <i>can't</i> do it."	"You try."
"Do it <i>this</i> way."	No control. "My ideas are no good."	"How do you think you could do this?"
"You don't want to . . ."	Confusion. "I don't know what's best best for me. Others need to tell me what I want."	"Would you like to . . . ?"
"Don't play with those friends (pick those clothes, etc.)."	Uncertain. "They don't trust my judgment, so I shouldn't."	"How do you feel when . . . ?" "What do you think?"
"It's time to do _____."	"I don't have to be responsible for remembering. They'll remind me."	"When do you plan to do _____?"

Notice the Difficulty¹

When we tell children something is "easy" to do, it can discourage them. If they succeed, they feel they haven't accomplished much, because the task was easy. If they can't do it, they feel like a failure for not being able to do something simple. If, on the other hand, we say, "That can be difficult," children feel good about accomplishing something difficult. If they can't do it, they at least know that the task was tough, not that they're inadequate. If we feel phony saying "that can be hard," look at the task from an inexperienced child's point of view. The first few times we do anything new, it usually *is* hard. Also, avoid saying, "That must be hard for *you*." Children might think, "It's only hard for *me*."

There are times when it *is* okay to do something for children that they can do for themselves. We need to use discretion to decide when our children are tired or in need of extra attention. Just try to maintain a balance. Nudge, but don't push. Guide, but don't rescue. Coach, but don't control.

Ask Their Opinions ☆☆☆☆

Involve children in solving problems by asking questions like "What do *you* think we could do?" Allow them to make decisions about things that directly affect them, such as selecting their own library books or deciding how to spend their allowances.

When people speak about your children like they aren't there, show respect for your children by involving them in the conversation. If the cashier asks, "What grade is he in?" let your child answer the question. Encourage children to describe their symptoms to the doctor, explain to the dentist how they brush their teeth, order their own food in restaurants, or buy their own candy.

As children mature, they naturally develop individual opinions. These opinions are obviously less experienced views than adults have, but no less valid or important. Our job as parents is not to create carbon copies of ourselves, with identical beliefs and preferences. It is much healthier to encourage

and respect our children's opinions and preferences, even if we don't agree with them. If we don't force our values and opinions on children, but simply share *our* opinions, children are more likely to consider them. Don't assume that the opinion or value children or teens have today is what they will always believe. Trust the growth and maturation process. Get to know your children as unique human beings, with individual opinions. We can learn much from their perceptions and grow more ourselves.



Wait Before Answering Questions

Children are famous for asking questions: "When will the pool be open?" "Why do I have to study? I got all my work done at school." We often think we need to immediately respond with an answer.

A Graduate's Story. My friend, Diane, was watching TV with her two girls, 9 and 7. They saw a commercial about a feminine pad with "wings." The nine-year-old asked, "What's that about?" Diane had been waiting for a "teachable moment" to have this talk and explained the menstrual cycle to her daughters. When she finished, the daughter said, "So do the pads really fly?"

Usually, when children ask a question, they've already thought about the answer. Find out what your children are thinking, first. "Why is the pool still closed during the winter?" "Why do you think your teacher asks you to study at home?" When we take the time to listen to children's ideas, they often reveal the real reason they asked the question.

A Graduate's Story. My son came home from school one day and asked, as he had before, "Why is Daddy only home on the weekends?" I was tempted to give him the answers I always gave, "Daddy has to travel all week for his job" and "So we have enough money to live in this house and so I can stay home with you." This time, I used my new skills and asked him, "Why do you think Daddy is gone all week?" He said, "Well, Joey's parents are divorced and he only sees his dad on weekends. Are you and Daddy getting a divorce?" I was floored! I never would have guessed that my son had doubts about our marriage! I quickly reassured him that all was fine and that Daddy wished he **could** be home more, to spend more time with **all** of us. I was so grateful I learned this skill. Otherwise, my son could have gone on misinterpreting our family situation for something it wasn't.

Usually, the process of finding an answer to a child's question is as valuable as the answer itself. Don't feel you or your children need an immediate answer. If you do answer your children's question, be brief, use words your children understand, and answer only what they asked.

A Graduate's Story. When I was pregnant with my second child, my son Denny, who was four at the time, was very curious about the reproductive process. I answered his questions honestly and factually. He'd think about the answers, sometimes for days, and then ask another question, often out of the blue. We'd gotten to the part about the male's sperm fertilizing the female's egg. (I hoped I wouldn't have to explain any further!) One day, as we were driving in the car, he asked, "How does the sperm get from the man to the woman?" I explained in general terms and he thought about the answer. "So did Daddy . . .?" Now, I was getting nervous and uncomfortable. I matter-of-factly said, "Yes," and added my values of sex within the context of love and marriage. He excitedly asked, "Can I watch the next time you do it?" . . . I tried to not laugh or react in shock and quickly, calmly said, "No, it's a very private moment between husband and wife." That was it! He knew all the facts and never asked any other questions.



Show Children How to Use Outside Resources

We can develop our children's independence by showing children the other resources available to them. You can get a book on insects to find out what kind of bug your child found. Encourage your daughter to have a beauty make-over, to learn appropriate ways to apply makeup. Have a teacher recommend a tutor to help with problem subjects. If children are concerned about being overweight, buy books or encourage them to attend a special class to learn how to lose weight in healthy ways. Aside from children learning to be resourceful and relieving parents from being know-it-alls, advice from outside sources usually carries more weight than lectures from Mom or Dad.



Respect Their Privacy

- **Privacy is a two-way street; parents expect privacy and need to extend the same courtesy to their children.** Older children, especially *teens*, have a strong need for privacy. Teens live in two rather unrelated worlds—the world of friends and the world of home. They try to maintain boundaries between these worlds by not talking about parents to their peers and not talking about peers to their parents. Teens often view their parents' questions about their friends as an intrusion into their private world and may lie to maintain their privacy. (See Chapter 12, “PO Toolset,” for more information on lying.)
- **Set priorities about what qualifies as a “need to know” issue and what children can keep private.** Make these “need to know” issues clear to children, along with the reasons for this need. We can reassure them that they still have areas of privacy they do not have to share. For instance, their telephone conversations and letters are their private concerns as long as there has been no sign that the child has been harassing people. A “need to know” list might include²:

COMMON “NEED TO KNOW” ISSUES

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends' behavior • Whereabouts in free time • Snacking behavior • TV, Internet, computer, and electronic game usage • Behavior at school • Homework accomplished | <p><i>For older children, we might add:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual behavior of/with peers • Use of drugs or alcohol • People/behavior at parties • Transportation arrangements • Behavior driving/riding in cars |
|--|--|

- **Let children take charge of their own bodies, such as their hair styles or clothes.** Young children frequently choose clothes that don't match or style their hair in imperfect ways. We can offer our opinions, but let children make the final decision. For a special occasion, such as a wedding or picture day, get agreements in advance to let you style their hair or pick the outfit *that* day. Remind them that they can usually decide these for themselves. (If you still get flack, follow up with the suggestions from the Cooperation Toolset.) Avoid fussing with your child's hair, shirt tails, or posture. It's embarrassing and implies that they didn't do a good enough job and you are following behind correcting them.
- **Respect children's physical and emotional space, and their property rights.** This can prevent many sibling/peer conflicts. (The Sibling/Peer section of Chapter 8, “Problem-Solving Toolset,” details specific ways to mediate such disputes.)



Let Them Dream³

Children often have dreams or expectations that seem unrealistic to adults. When children share these dreams or hopes, don't rush to pop their bubbles. Ask questions that help them explore the pleasure of the fantasy, and only if necessary, the truth of reality. If children say they want to be a sports superstar, ask, “What would you like the most about being a star?” Or “What would it take to do that?” Avoid discouraging comments, such as “Everyone wants to be a star, but only a few will make it. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.” While this statement might be true, it doesn't necessarily mean the goal is impossible. Most professional athletes had to work extra hard to achieve their dreams—and their dreams were what motivated them to stick with it.

A Personal Story. When Amber was 4, she would say “I want to be a doctor when I grow up.” When I asked her why, she said, “so I can help my friends when they're sick. “When Amber needed a blood test for kindergarten, I explained what would happen and that it would hurt a little bit. I didn't add that I used to pass out at the sight of blood. To my amazement, she watched the nurse take her blood and didn't flinch or cry! I started to think “Maybe she would be a good doctor or nurse.”

Several months later, my 17-year-old dog had to be put to sleep. We had already discussed death with the children when another pet died. Despite my squeamishness about such procedures, I decided to be present when Punkin was put to sleep. Amber asked if she could go with me. I was very hesitant. I explained the procedure in detail and what "putting to sleep" really meant, but Amber still wanted to go. At the vet's, I offered her the option of leaving if she felt uncomfortable. She helped me hold and caress Punkin as she left us. I cried the whole way home, but Amber was much more matter-of-fact about the experience. She viewed it like a veterinarian.

Later that year, Amber said her desire to be a people doctor had changed into a desire to be a veterinarian. When our other dog had dozens of tumors removed, I could hardly stand to look at her stitches without getting squeamish. When Taffy chewed out one of the stitches on her paw, Amber helped my husband wrap it and he gave her a close inspection of the wound, explaining the different skin layers.

The next day, Amber wanted to come with me to the vet's office. I was feeling light-headed just thinking about the sight of watching the vet put in new stitches. When we spoke to the vet, he explained the options, with all the skin-layer alternatives. I felt seriously faint. I told him to do whatever was best for Taffy and that I'd wait in the lobby. Amber said, "Mom! Someone has to be here for Taffy! I want to stay and hold her." I knew she would be well-behaved and helpful, and the vet said her presence was no problem. I reminded her that she could come to the lobby if she changed her mind. I sat down and hung my head between my knees, while my six-year-old watched with fascination as Taffy got her stitches. I felt like a such a wimp. Later, Amber performed pretend surgery on her stuffed animals, with rubber gloves, soapy water, and a pretend needle and thread.

I am now convinced Amber really would make a fine vet or doctor. She taught me a big lesson about allowing a child to dream and not underestimating a child's abilities. Any dream is possible, if someone is willing to believe enough in the dream to do what it takes to make it happen.



Nudge, but Don't Push ☆☆☆☆

Nudging is a firm and gentle encouragement to take the next step.

Pushing is an unrealistic pressured expectation to reach the final goal all at once.

Some children are naturally more independent, always wanting to do things by themselves. Others are more dependent, frequently asking for help and hesitant to try new tasks. As parents, we need to respect our children's temperaments and respond accordingly. When children are naturally daring, we can teach skills for taking safe risks and supervise them until they have mastered the skills. When children are hesitant and truly scared of new experiences, we can nudge and encourage them to take the next step. We can read their reactions and be ready to back off a bit or slowly ease them into a new situation.

At times, children want to do something very much, but aren't emotionally or physically ready. They want to go swimming, but are still afraid of the water or want to ride a two-wheeler, but still aren't coordinated enough to remove the training wheels. Instead of forcing, urging, or pressuring children, we can express our confidence in their growing abilities and reassure them that some day they *will* do these things. At these times, offer quick tips and lots of encouragement. Here are three behaviors parents often push their children too quickly to do and how they can nudge instead:

- ▶ *Toilet training:* "You wanted to play longer so you didn't get to the potty on time. I'm sure you'll stop sooner next time so your pants stay clean and dry."
- ▶ *Getting ready on time:* "You had your lunch and backpack ready, but couldn't find your shoes. Where could you put them so you can find them quickly next time?"
- ▶ *Getting a job:* "You'd really like to be able to buy _____. Where could you earn the money?"



Let Go and Trust

Every stage of life presents separation issues. First children are weaned, then potty trained, they start school, begin to date, drive a car, move out, maybe get married, and before we know it we could be grandparents! Some stages of separation are easier for us to deal with. Each of these stages of separation, however, prepares both our children and us with the inner strength and confidence necessary for our children to become responsible, independent adults. As hard as it may be, we must work through our conflicting feelings, so we can do what is best for our children—to let go, lovingly and with support.

The key ingredient for building independence is to let go—let go of our need to control, desire to be needed, and temptation to rescue. Our children will always *need* us, but the ways they need us change over the years. Letting go does not mean parents cut the reins and allow total freedom. As you are letting go, teach them the skills they need to be responsible, independent adults. By replacing unhelpful habits with helpful responses, we maintain a healthy balance between freedom and limits.

TIPS FOR TOTS TO TEENS

In my parenting classes, we brainstorm ideas for building independence at each stage of childhood. Here are just a few suggestions from other parents. You can probably think of even more.

Let *infants* reach for objects, instead of scooting them closer. Child-proof their environment, so they can safely explore their world. Don't immediately rush to your crying infant—walk or finish going to the bathroom first. It is important to respond faithfully, so our children learn to trust us and feel secure. But we can pause a few seconds to see if they can calm themselves down or resolve their own problems.

***A Personal Story.** Like many parents, I used to believe infants aren't capable of solving their own problems. At a conference I once attended, the instructor asked a group of nearly a hundred parent educators, "At what age are children capable of solving their own problems?" Some of us answered, "Two, when children can think logically." "Earlier," the instructor responded. Several classmates answered, "At birth," remembering that infants cry when they are wet or hungry. "Earlier," was the instructor's reply. We looked puzzled. Then she asked, "When you are pregnant—men, imagine a woman you know—what do babies do when they're cramped in a tummy?" We all replied in unison, "They kick!" "Right," she replied, "when babies have a problem, like being cramped, they solve the problem by stretching their legs! Humans are innately capable, from the time of conception, to resolve problems. Their ability is dependent on their intellectual and physical abilities, but they are nevertheless capable to some degree."*

Let *toddlers* try. Let them feed themselves—put a mat under the high chair, use finger foods, and get easy-to-use utensils. Supervise their teeth-brushing by pretending you are a dentist who is checking or counting their teeth when they are done. As they learn to put on their clothes, teach skills without taking over. Stay nearby, guiding and coaching, but let them do as much as they can.

Let *preschoolers* help. They can sort dirty clothes, fold towels and wash cloths, and match socks. In the kitchen, let them measure, pour, and stir. Teach them how to dust furniture, removing any breakable items for them, at first. Outside, let them water plants or spray-clean lawn furniture. They can gather sticks before mowing or help rake leaves. Promise to let them play in the pile before you dispose of the leaves. At the grocery store, let them carry non-breakable items to the cart. Give them coupons and see if they can match them with the right items. Let them choose their clothes and get dressed, teaching skills when you help. Don't expect perfection; they will improve with more practice.

Hold *elementary school children* accountable for their responsibilities and let them discover their own way of doing things. Let them get ready and out the door on time, *on their own*. (We discuss in Chapter 13, "Discipline Toolset," what to do when children are running late.) Remember that school and homework are their "jobs." We can teach skills when we intervene, without doing everything for them.

A Personal Story. *If we take the time to teach skills, these are realistic expectations. By first grade, both of my children were totally self-sufficient in the morning. They set their own alarms, took a shower and got dressed, made their own breakfast, packed their own lunches, found and filled their own backpacks, and found ways to know when it was time to go to the bus stop. They had practiced and refined these skills during their preschool and kindergarten years, when they only attended half days and had more time to get ready. Back then, I taught parenting classes most evenings and got home late. I was bumping into walls at 6 a.m. and could hardly think straight. My **only** task was to give the children milk money—and I regularly forgot to do it! By planning ahead, teaching skills, and being patient, I now have two self-sufficient children who rarely need my help.*

If we take the time to teach skills, elementary-age children can be solely responsible for certain family chores and earning and budgeting money. As they mature, let them try riskier activities with your supervision: using sharper scissors and knives or crossing a not-too-busy street. By late elementary school, we can expand their boundaries, letting them go to a friend's house around the corner by themselves (this depends on your neighborhood, of course). Let your children be responsible for remembering their after-school activities. Get agreements for the responsibilities that come from extra privileges, such as calling you when they arrive at the friend's house.

Preteens (junior high) and teens (high school) can have even more expanded boundaries and responsibilities. Hold them accountable for planning and managing their home, work, and school schedules and budgeting their finances. Have open discussions about *their* opinions and values. They appreciate our efforts to better understand them and know us well enough to know our opinions on almost any topic. As we show our willingness to listen to their differing opinions, they actually ask for our advice more often.

Let teens indulge in harmless clothing or hair fads. Each generation has some fashion fad that parents dislike—it's their way of expressing of their independence and individuality. Most fads are harmless and will pass quickly. If a fad, such as body piercing, raises healthy or safety risks, use parent/child problem solving in the Clear Communication Toolset to get agreements that allow teens a safe way to express their independence.

Recognize that teenagers need separate identities from their parents or their childhood identities. This process is called individuation. It starts at birth, but really blossoms in the teen years. As teens strive to become unique individuals, they *try on* different identities. These are usually temporary, unless we overreact and push them to fit our mold of who they should be. Such pressure only causes teens to rebel and make even stronger statements of independence.

Individuation is the natural, necessary process of becoming an individual, with ideas, identity, beliefs, and values all one's own.

Rebellion is a reaction to control.

Every teen is individuating, but not every teen rebels. Individuation can turn into rebellion—if parents try to control children's efforts to express their independence and individuality.

When a four-year-old dresses in a Superman cape and jumps off the couch, we say, "Isn't that cute?" We might address the dangers of jumping off couches, but we humor the act of trying on a different identity. When teenagers wear outlandish clothes and put glitter in their hair, many parents flip out! Jane Nelsen, the author of *Positive Discipline for Teenagers*, suggests parents also develop an "isn't that cute" attitude with teens. We can express our concerns about dangerous acts, but need to remember that part of a teen's "job" is to try on different identities, to figure out who they are separate from their parents.

In my T.I.P.S. for Teens class, we discuss individuation. I share an analogy with the class that helps explain the values clarification process children go through.

Children are born with an invisible backpack on their backs. As they go through life, people put things in their backpacks—rules, roles, identities, values, and beliefs. Some examples are "Look

both ways before you cross the street,” “You’re the minister’s child so you have to set a good example,” or “Change your underwear every day in case you are in an accident.”

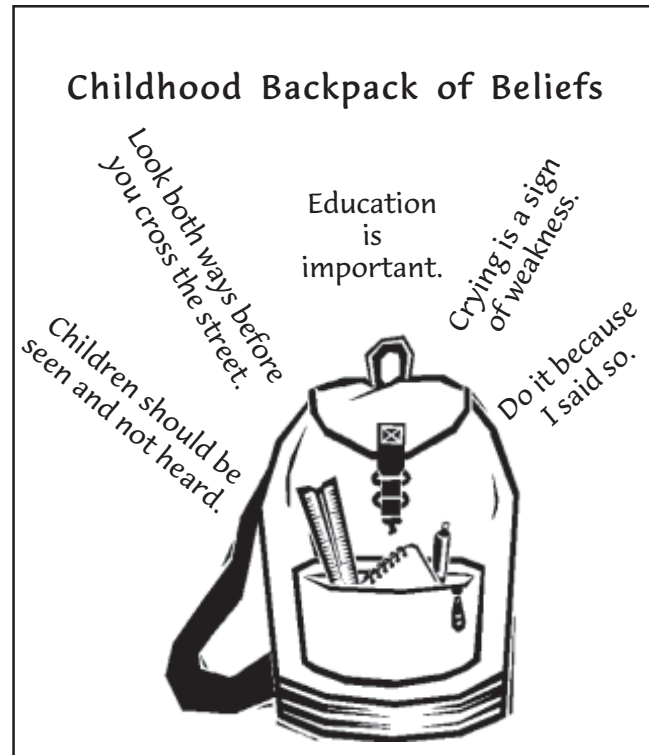
Some children examine and question each belief that goes into their backpack. They want control over their backpack from the toddler years on. When we give orders, make requests, or say “no” without any reason, it is like stuffing something in their backpacks without their permission. These children resist such control and test these rules or values before accepting them into their backpacks.

Other children misunderstand what is put into their backpack. If a parent says “education is important,” as the parent takes over responsibility for getting homework done, children might inaccurately conclude, “Education is important to *them*,” or “It is *their* responsibility to make sure I remember my homework.” Later in life, problem behaviors can arise from these inaccurate beliefs. These parents will wonder why their children aren’t developing self-responsibility but don’t realize it is partly because there is a rule or belief in the backpack that the child misunderstood.

Finally, there are some children who don’t question what others put into their backpack, until it becomes heavy or they realize people are sticking things in without the children knowing what they are. By the teen years, their backpacks are getting rather heavy and teens figure, “If I have to carry this thing around the rest of my life, I want to know what’s in it.” They begin to go through their backpacks, examining the rules, values, and beliefs. They might accept some beliefs right away: “I know I need to look both ways before I cross the street, because the risk of not doing it is dangerous.” Others they might reject or accept on their own terms, “I’ll change my underwear every day, because I want to be clean, not because I fear an accident.” Some they might reject, “I don’t care if I’m the minister’s child, I’m tired of people expecting me to be perfect. I’ll do what I want to do, just to prove I’m my own person.” Others they may need to question and test, before accepting, “Well, education is important to my parents, but sometimes it seems like a waste of time to me.” They need to wrestle with these values and beliefs, before settling into what *their* beliefs will be.

The individuation process is very healthy and normal. In order to be a fully-functioning, well-balanced adult, one must have a sense of individual identity. Although children may test or seem to reject their parents’ values or beliefs, the process is usually short-lived. If parents don’t get into power struggles with their children, forcing their beliefs on them, children and teens usually consider the options and settle on beliefs, rules, and values that are very close to their parents’.

The teen years are a time when parents must readjust how much they teach skills and how much they listen to their children’s opinions and decisions (see Chapters 7 and 8, “Child Problem Toolbox”). As we learned in Chapter 3, “The Universal Blueprint,” teenagers “own” most of the problems they experience. We don’t want to rescue them from these problems, so we use the skills in the Child Problem Toolbox instead. These tools help teens resolve their own problems or make decisions. We explore the details of *how* to do this in the next chapter.



LET GO

*Letting go does not mean to stop caring,
it means I can't take responsibility for someone else.*

*Letting go is not cutting others off,
but the realization I can't control others.*

*Letting go is not enabling,
but allowing others to learn from natural consequences.*

*Letting go is admitting powerlessness,
which means that the outcome is not in my hands.*

*Letting go is not to try to change or blame another;
it is making the most of myself.*

*Letting go is not to care **for**, but rather it is caring **about** others.*

Letting go is not to diagnose, but to support.

*Letting go is not judging others,
but is allowing them to be fallible human beings.*

*Letting go refuses to arrange or guarantee results
and allows others to make choices that determine their own destinies.*

*Letting go refuses to protect others from reality
but encourages one to face the facts.*

*Letting go refuses to nag, scold, or argue
but instead searches out my own shortcomings and corrects them.*

Letting go is not regretting the past but growing and living for the future.

Letting go is fearing less and loving more.

Anonymous

SUMMARY SHEET INDEPENDENCE TOOLSET

OPENLY MODEL BEHAVIOR ☆☆☆☆

TEACH SKILLS ☆☆☆☆

1. Plan Ahead.
2. Explain the value of the skill.
3. Break the task into smaller steps.
4. Let children watch.
5. Let children try.
6. Let children do things their way.
7. Offer choices.
8. Work together.
9. Make it fun and “child-friendly.”
10. Offer encouragement at every step.

GIVE A QUICK TIP

LET CHILDREN BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR MISTAKES ☆☆☆☆

LET CHILDREN DO THINGS BY THEMSELVES ☆☆☆☆

NOTICE THE DIFFICULTY

LET CHILDREN HELP YOU

ASK THEIR OPINION ☆☆☆☆

WAIT BEFORE ANSWERING QUESTIONS

SHOW CHILDREN HOW TO USE OUTSIDE RESOURCES

RESPECT CHILDREN’S PRIVACY

LET CHILDREN DREAM

NUDGE, BUT DON’T PUSH ☆☆☆☆

LET GO AND TRUST

PRACTICE EXERCISES

A. Use the Tools. Change each statement to one that will encourage a child's independence, using the suggested independence tools. (Possible answers are at the end of the chapter.)

1. A child says, "I'm hungry." The parent is tempted to say, "I'll fix you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich." How can the parent *teach skills*?
2. A parent is tempted to say, "I wish you weren't such a procrastinator. You always put things off until the last minute!" How can the parent *openly model behavior*?
3. A parent is tempted to say, "Let me sort the dirty laundry. They have to be separated properly." How can the parent *give a quick tip*?
4. A parent is tempted to say, "That game is too hard to set up. Pick a different one." What can the parent say or do to *let the children do it by themselves*?
5. A parent is tempted to say, "Your make-up looks terrible! You look like a clown!" How can the parent *notice the difficulty* of applying make-up?
6. A child asks, "Can I color these invitations for your [adult] party?" The parent is tempted to say, "These invitations have to be colored in just right. Let me do them." How can the parent *let the child help*?
7. A parent is planning to plant a vegetable garden. How can the parent *involve the children*?
8. A child asks, "Why do you work, and work, and work?" The parent is tempted to say, "So I can afford this house and all your toys!" What can the parent say *before answering this question*?
9. A child says, "I want hair like Emily's." The parent is tempted to say, "Don't dye your hair. Your shade is so unique!" How can the parent *show the child how to use outside resources*?
10. A child complains, "Patty keeps messing up my tower." The parent is tempted to say, "Why don't you let Patty help you build it?" What can the parent say or do to *respect this child's privacy*?
11. A child says, "I want to be a park ranger when I grow up." The parent is tempted to say, "There's no money and hardly any jobs in forestry. Get a real job and go to the park on your days off." What can the parent say or do to *let the child dream*?
12. A child who still wets the bed asks to spend the night at a friend's house. The parent is tempted to say, "You can't, because you still wet the bed at night." How can the parent *nudge, but not push*?

B. Encourage Independence. In this exercise you'll see a series of situations that often frustrate parents or tempt them to take over. As you read each situation ask yourself, "*What could I say or do to encourage my child's independence?*" Draw on *all* the techniques you just learned.

1. A child calls from school to say, "I forgot my lunch. Will you bring it to me?"
2. A child says, "I can't work this zipper."
3. A child resists wearing a coat, saying "I get hot on the way home from school!"
4. A parent offers his child a choice between eggs or cereal for breakfast. The child chooses eggs. When the parent serves the eggs, the child says "I changed my mind. I don't want these eggs. I want cereal instead."
5. A preteen says, "I want to invite Jimmy to my birthday party, but I also want to invite Scott and they hate each other. What should I do?"
6. A teen says, "I'm going to save my allowance for a motorcycle."

Activity for the Week

List things you now do for your children that they could do themselves. Some examples are picking up clothes, buttoning shirts, buying expensive toys or clothes for them. Now look at the list and brainstorm ideas for transferring responsibility to your children.

Possible Answers

These are just possible answers. Give your own answers before you read these.

A: Use the Tools

1. “You can fix a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. . . You don’t know how? Here’s what you do. Take two pieces of bread. Use a butter knife to spread the peanut butter . . . Yeah, that’s tricky . . . That’s it! . . . Then the jelly . . . Now put the other piece of bread on top. You did it! Your very own peanut butter and jelly sandwich!”
2. When parents have a project to do that they don’t feel like doing or that has a deadline, they can say aloud to themselves, “I really should (whatever the task or project is). I really don’t feel like it, but if I do it now, (the positive consequence or benefit of getting it done.) Then I can do (something the parent likes).”
3. “When dark clothes are washed with the light ones, they get dark colors all over them, so I separate them into different piles. This is the basket for the whites, this is the basket for the darks. Let me know if you aren’t sure which basket to use.”
4. “That’s a tricky game to set up! You’ve got the board and cards in the right place. If you take the pieces and look at the picture, you can sometimes see where they belong.”
5. “It can take awhile to get the hang of how much make-up to put on. Sometimes, if I blend my eye shadow with this brush, it doesn’t seem so strong.”
6. There are three possible options: (a) “I’d like to do the coloring, but you can help me with the folding and licking the stamps and envelopes. Here are some envelopes to do.” (b) Plan ahead and make a few extras so you can say, “Here’s one you can color.” Chances are it will take the child a longer time to color it. (c) Allow the child to color a few and send those invitations to people on your list who would appreciate your child’s coloring.
7. “Summer is coming soon. Do you have any ideas for vegetables you’d like to grow?” (Later) “Tell me which seeds you would like to plant and I’ll show you how to do it.”
8. “I wish I didn’t have to work so much. Why do *you* think I have to?” (My daughter asked me this question and I replied this way. Her answer was, “Because you help lots of people?” I thought it was neat that she understood the importance of my work.)
9. “The next time we get your hair done, ask Lory how much it costs to color hair, what shades there are, how often people have to keep dying it, and what could happen to your real hair color if you dye it.” (This was my daughter’s question and my response.)
10. “John, you can build that tower up in your room with the door shut. Or Patty, you can play with something else.” (When Amber was a toddler, I borrowed a large play gate. When Amber bothered Chris or he played with small toys that Amber could choke on, *Chris* played inside the play gate and Amber roamed the child-proofed house.)
11. “You really like being in the woods, don’t you? What else would you like about being a forest ranger?” (This was my husband’s dream when he was younger. His parents thought he’d be better as an engineer. Now, he’s an environmental engineer.)
12. “One of these days, you’ll be able to stay dry all night. Then you can stay all night at Susie’s.”

B: Encourage Independence

1. "I bet you'll remember your lunch tomorrow! What can you do about lunch today?"
2. "Zippers are really tough. Here, you take this side and I'll take the other. Put your side into this spot right here. I'll hold this side. Now pull! . . . There you go!"
3. "Go look at the thermometer. If it is 50 degrees or higher, you can go without a coat." (A great idea is to cut out pictures of clothing, such as a winter coat, hat, bathing suit, and sweater. Paste to an outdoor thermometer by the appropriate degree markers. For example, 30 degrees = hat and mittens, 40° = winter coat, 50° = sweater, 60° = long-sleeved shirt, 70° = shorts, 80° = bathing suit.)
4. "Since you asked for the eggs today, you'll need to eat them. I only cook breakfast once. Tomorrow you can have cereal." Or "After you eat the eggs you asked for, you can fix yourself cereal."
5. "Well, that's a dilemma. *You* are friends with both Jimmy *and* Scott, but don't want them to ruin your party. What do you think your options are?"
6. "You'd like a motorcycle, huh? What do you like the most about motorcycles?" "Are there any extra dangers of owning a motorcycle?" "How much would you have to save? What other expenses are involved, like a license or helmet?"

WHAT'S NEXT?

We have completed our tour of the Prevention Toolbox. Practice using these skills daily. As we move through the rest of the toolsets, we refer to these tools often.

Chapter 7, "F-A-X Listening Toolset," is the first stop on our tour of the Child Problem Toolbox (Step B of the Universal Blueprint). We review the process of identifying Child Problems and keeping the ball in the child's (or other person's) court. We learn about the first step in the F-A-X communication process—Focus on feelings. We discover which responses can accidentally shut down communication. Then we practice the art and skill of effective listening.

REFERENCES

1. "Notice the Difficulty" is a paraphrasing of the skill, "Show Respect for their Struggle," in *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Avon Books, 1982) p. 155.
2. *Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness*, by Paul Ekman, Ph.D. (Penguin Books, 1989) p. 123.
3. "Let Them Dream" is an expanded description of a skill called "Don't Take Away Hope," which I first read in *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Avon Books, 1982) pp. 145, 153.