

Independence

This is the time of year when we celebrate independence. Try a word association game with any friend. I guarantee the results. Mention "Independence" and you will hear associations with our National holiday, the 4th of July. I love the 4th of July. Who does not smile when thinking of the Main Street Parade with our little tykes in their red "Radio Flyer" wagons, randomly waiving the Stars and Stripes? The right menu clearly is an important part of our National ritual. Who does not grill some form of beast or gorge on buttery corn-o-cob? For desert some ice cream if you please. It is all good.

Apart from the namesake Holiday, however, the idea of "independence," cast in the light of parenthood, can be at the same time both fun and frustrating. Then consider the theological consequences of the word and you will ignite a sermon. As a pediatrician I will attend to the former and allow Pastor George the privilege of the latter.

As a parent the word independence may brings a "mixed bag" of emotions, both wonderful and worrisome. Eventually, our children will need to take care of themselves (if not take care of us too) so we need to teach them now, no matter how much it hurts. The concept of growing their independence needs to be just like the porridge of Goldilocks' taste ... not too hot, not too cold, just right.

Developmentally, independence begins from the moment of birth ... literally the moment the umbilical cord is clamped and the baby begins to take her own breath. On it goes from there. Maintain her body temperature. Suckle food. And so forth, with more and more responsibility as the years pass. The power curve of independence skills grows most steep at two developmental stages, the "terror"-iffic twos and adolescence.

Developmental experts teach that we need to reinforce our toddler's individual personhood. We do so naturally when we speak directly to her, attentively listen to what she tries to say, and ultimately demonstrate that her own opinion matters. Provide



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your youngster an opportunity to choose among acceptable alternatives whenever possible. For example let her pick the foods she wants to eat, let her wear the clothes she wants to wear, and play the games she wants to play. Allowing for these simple avenues of self-direction will teach your youngster to have the confidence necessary to make more substantial decisions. However, the key to avoiding frustration (on both your part and hers) is to limit the choices. Think of a Chinese menu ... even an experienced diner will ask as for assistance in narrowing the menu down to a few select dishes.

Don't confuse allowing children to choose with the recent popular notions

of "lazafare" parenting. Disaster will result to those who ignore the truth that parents need to maintain control over all parts of a youngster's life until their child's maturity can match their responsibility. How? I'm not kidding when I say "pray." Additionally, ensure that all choices offered are safe enough to avoid permanent damage. Above all, in fostering independence, it is most important that our children (at all times) remain safe and feel secure. Have a "happy healthy" Independence Day.