

INDEPENDENCE

What Is This Developmental Skill?

Independence is the growing ability to complete tasks, make appropriate choices, solve everyday problems, and care for oneself while still seeking help when needed. Healthy independence develops from secure dependence on responsive adults.

How Does This Normally Develop?

Children become independent gradually. Caregivers first complete tasks for them, then complete tasks with them, and finally remain available while children practice on their own. Children develop confidence when adults provide encouragement, reasonable choices, and support after mistakes. Independence does not mean that a child no longer needs connection or guidance.

How Can Neglect Interfere With Its Development?

Some children may have been left to manage themselves too early. They may reject help, distrust adults, or believe that needing assistance is dangerous. Other children may have had so few opportunities for guidance and practice that they remain dependent on adults for tasks they could eventually learn. Chronic stress may also reduce confidence, problem-solving ability, and willingness to try unfamiliar tasks.

What Might This Look Like?

The child may:

- Insist, "I can do it myself," even when struggling.
- Become angry or embarrassed when help is offered.
- Avoid trying tasks without an adult nearby.
- Give up quickly when something becomes difficult.
- Make unsafe decisions in an effort to appear capable.
- Take responsibility for siblings or adults.
- Alternate between extreme independence and helplessness.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers should offer support without taking over unnecessarily. Tasks can be divided into what the child can do independently, what can be completed with help, and what the adult must currently manage. Choices should be limited, realistic, and appropriate to the child's developmental level.

The goal is interdependence: the ability to act independently while trusting that safe adults remain available.

From Understanding to Attunement

A child's resistance to help may be a survival strategy, while excessive dependence may reflect fear of failure or limited experience. An attuned response might be:

"You can try this part on your own, and I will stay close. Asking for help does not mean you have failed."