



Wee Learn



Wee Learners(4 - 5 years): How to Build Independence in Preschoolers

From birth, children are on a quest for independence. We see this as babies try to spoon-feed themselves or insist on taking off their own diapers, as toddlers demand to dress themselves or turn the faucet on at the sink. Opportunities to develop independence are immensely important for building a sense of self and self-esteem. Being home-bound during COVID-19 creates a great opportunity for parents to nurture budding independence. Here are some simple ways to do just that.

Set predictable routines. It may seem surprising, but establishing a consistent routine is important for nurturing independence. Just like adults, when children can anticipate their day, they are better equipped to take on responsibilities. As children experience these routines over and over, they learn to anticipate what comes next, and they start to take on more responsibility with less help.

Let your child choose. Another way to support your child's independence is to give them choices. Involve them in deciding what to wear, what to play or who to call. This does not have to mean they have free rein. Provide two or three options, and then praise their great ability to make a choice.

Let your child help. Children love to help! In addition to building independence, this is a great tool for calming tantrums or redirecting behavior by giving them a sense of control. When you allow your child to help, you foster their confidence and give them an opportunity to learn something new.

Give your child chores. Even preschoolers can start to have chores. A lot of research supports chores for children as a way of building a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, developing executive functions, teaching teamwork and nurturing empathy.

Let your child solve problems. Be sure to allow your child to try things that are hard and to solve (small) problems on their own. Presenting your child with tasks that are a little bit challenging, but still within the realm of what they can do with some support, helps them learn to deal with frustration, solve problem, and stick out challenging situations.

Encourage projects. Projects, which can include anything from coloring to building to puzzles to crafts, provide opportunities for children to focus their attention on a contained activity for a period of time.

Nurture free play. Independent and unstructured play is very important for fostering creativity, problem-solving and autonomy. Offer your preschooler a variety of art materials (crayons, markers, chalk, finger paints), building materials (blocks, MagnaTiles, Legos) or imaginary play props and let them construct their own craft or play.

What to say while they work and play. In addition to setting up opportunities for your child to build independence, it's important for you to let them know that you see their efforts, their persistence, their bravery, their growth. By offering verbal feedback, you are giving positive attention to the qualities that you want to foster in your child and making it more likely these behaviors will happen again.

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