

Ms. Lahey tells of her and her husband's struggle to implement her own parenting advice.

Less Really is More: Parenting for Autonomy and Competence

When my husband and I started to transform our own parenting, we knew it would be a shock to the flawed system we'd been cultivating in our family for fifteen years. Rather than leave our kids to wonder whether their parents had suddenly been taken over by aliens, we sat down one night with them and laid it all out - our parenting transgressions and our plans to reform them. Yes, the teen rolled his eyes. Finn asked to be excused from the table about two minutes until the discussion. But when we admitted that we had been doing things all wrong, and that we believed that changing the way we parent would make them better, more independent, confident, and competent people, I think I caught them listening. We told them that the more competent they became, the more we would let them do for themselves. The more we saw that they could handle difficult decisions, the more we would trust them to make them.

There were some initial hiccups and setbacks, maybe even some pushback and tantrums, but once the kids figured out we had no plans to go back to our old ways of dependent parenting, they stepped up. My older son, who has always been fairly independent, started to take responsibility for everything in his life I did not need to be a part of anymore. He started using the alarms on his calendar as a backup for his spotty memory. He made checklists to help him remember the things he needs to do before the start of the school day. He organized his forms for high school and gave me what he needed me to read and sign. He took control of ordering his back-to-school supplies, packed for two weeks of camp, and left notes for me on the counter when people called. My younger son, who is usually willing and eager to let me do everything for him, suddenly took charge of his morning tasks without being asked and even made a checklist after forgetting his towel one day at our local pond. He cleaned his room, organized his desk, and figured out where and when he planned to complete his homework every night. Best of all, he saw that my older son could do laundry and asked to be taught how to use the washer and dryer, too.

Two weeks into our blissful honeymoon period, my younger son suffered a bit of a setback in his journey toward autonomy and competence. As the door slammed closed on the last kid heading for the school bus, I noticed his math and spelling homework lying on the living room coffee table. I looked out the window at the bus stop, and there he was, oblivious to his oversight, twirling his hands in the air while explaining some detail of an imaginary world to his friend Pierce. I looked back down at the homework. And back out the window. And back to the homework.

And then I did my best to get on with my day, knowing that I was scheduled to stop by school later, and it would be so easy to deliver Finn's homework to his classroom, maybe even surreptitiously slide it into his locker or backpack. He'd done such a good job on it, too, so conscientiously completing it in his neatest handwriting, effort now wasted. I picked it up off the table, looked at the neat letters and numbers, and put it down again.

Flummoxed, I turned to Facebook and posted,

For those of you who think this whole letting my kids mess up things is easy, know this. One of my sons left his homework assignment on the living room table, completed in a timely and neat fashion. I have to go to his school anyway to drop something off. Leaving that homework on the table, knowing it will cost him his recess today, is KILLING ME. I've looked at it twenty times, even picked it up once. But there it is. And there it will stay, waiting for him to see when he gets home and realizes what he could have done to make sure that homework made it into his backpack and his teacher's hands.

Facebook friends began responding immediately, many with their pledges of support and enthusiastic approval and lots of "Likes," but one friend posted her strong disapproval.

Jessica I admire you greatly, as I hope you know, but I could not do this. I forget things every day. I have driven things to my husband's office that he has left on the kitchen counter. I think a certain level of distraction is inevitable in our lives, no matter how hard we try, and high school kids are the most overwhelmed by it. I would be so happy that the homework

was done, on time, neat and ready that unless I was unable to do so, I would take it to school. I would save my consequences for homework that was not done or was not done well.

I thought about her words for the rest of the morning. I had to admit that yes, I would go out of my way to deliver a friend's forgotten wallet, or my husband's forgotten power cord, so why would I treat my children any differently?

Because I'm not raising those other people. I treat my children differently because I have a greater responsibility to them than to make them happy and grateful for my love and support. In order to raise competent, capable adults, I have to love them enough to put their learning before my happiness.

This shift in the way I understood my role as a parent was the hardest part of our switch to a more autonomy-supportive parenting style: harder than watching my kids mess up, harder than knowing they were going to mess up before they did and not preventing those train wrecks. I had to stop equating the act of doing things for my children - saving them from themselves, scoring a smile and a hug when I showed up at school with a dropped mitten or toy - with good parenting. It still feels good to do things for them, and I still do - all the time. But the things I do for them are different now, and my motivations are based on an evaluation of their needs, not mine. Before, I was doing the things they could do for themselves to feel good about my parenting. Now, when I choose to do things for my children, I know my actions come from a place of genuine love, and I think my kids sense that, too.