

Supporting Independence

By Neelima Mhaskar

In the *The Absorbent Mind* Dr. Montessori says “Development takes the form of the drive towards an ever greater independence. It is like an arrow released from the bow, which flies straight, swift and sure.”

An individual is independent when he is able to function for himself; think and decide and act for himself within the social framework of the environment; when he can make independent responsible decisions. When an individual is independent he becomes confident, he is happy and has increased self-esteem.

To become independent one needs to have opportunities to do things, opportunities to choose, to decide, to gain experiences; thereby increasing his knowledge of the world around him.

It is the same for children too. Every opportunity, every experience increases his knowledge and leads him to the path of independence. Hence, adults in the child's environment have to support him by preparing an environment that is conducive to his natural development.

Needs of the Young Child

The young child needs love, security, order, routine and consistency to feel secure and to understand this new environment he finds himself in. He needs to see us using purposeful movements to be able to construct his own movements. He will need positive, encouraging responses from us for any new venture that he explores through his movements. If he gets a positive response, he will continue to explore and develop faith in his own capacities. So, when a child starts slithering he needs to be supported by providing an open space, by having things in the environment that arouse his interest and invites him to reach out to the object of his desire.

The young child needs us to use rich language to construct his own language. And when he constructs his language, he needs opportunities to use his language. So, we need to give him time and listen to him. By role modelling to our children, making things accessible and within their reach, by maintaining consistency in our approach, by collaboration and contribution we are leading the child to a sense of belonging. For this

young child opportunities to gain experience and acquire skills leading to independence are important.

Choices

Opportunity to choose from an early age conveys to him that he is capable of choosing; that we value his opinion. The process of seeing his choice through is what builds his character. It empowers the child to make right choices and it becomes a way of his life. It leads to independent thinking. In order to help the child make his own choice, we must have clear limits and boundaries. By making choices, any capacity that the child has and is acquiring through movement or language, is one step forward towards his journey of independence.

Movement

Movement is the foundation of learning. The child moves to learn. That is why the child has this urge to engage himself in practicing and repeating cycles of activities. This is to train himself by putting in maximum effort to bring about coordination of movement. He should be allowed to perform activities even if they serve no direct purpose, as it is through these activities that he tries to coordinate himself. We need to understand that any spontaneous action performed by the child is for his development. He wants to acquire knowledge of his own, to have experiences of his own and perceive things by his own unaided efforts.

From the moment of birth the main aim of the child is to gain functional independence and adapt to his culture. The child is on a path of self-construction and is driven to strive for independence naturally. Developing independence is a process. In the first 3 years of his life the child goes through many stages of independence depending on the capacities he has built up.

What does growing independence look like?

The growing independence is evident when the child is

- making choices
- able to express himself
- able to care for himself, others and the surroundings
- knowing and acting upon it when hungry, thirsty, sleepy or needs an activity
- toileting independently
- taking initiative and responsibility.

The Physical Aspect

In order to support this growing independence, it is important to create a harmonious environment with specifically designated areas for sleeping, feeding, physical care and movement. These designated areas help in creating order, which in turn helps the child create points of reference. These designated areas must constantly evolve to meet the changing needs of a developing child. The environment must grow as the child grows. Things that come in the way of a child's development must be removed even if they served as an aid in the past. The environment must be flexible. The adult must use observation and knowledge of the child's needs to plan future changes in the environment.

Let us look at some of the aspects of environment

The Sleeping Area

It is one of the most important areas that promotes independence from birth. The bed must be in a way that the child can get on and off the bed whenever they want to. Taking the step towards independence by getting in and out of one's own bed will lead to further steps in independence towards sleeping/resting when tired. The child can wake up in the middle of the night, go to the toilet, get water and so on without being dependent on the adult in the environment.

Independence can further be supported by involving the child, where they can help in caring for the environment. The making of the bed each morning can begin as a collaborative effort and the child can proceed to doing it himself. These may seem like very simple things for an adult but for the child to do these tasks independently does a lot to their self-esteem and confidence. They get the message – I can do this on my own. That is a big win for the child.

Dressing

It is important to choose comfortable clothes with simple fastenings for the child. A neatly arranged lower shelf in a wardrobe with classified arrangement of clothes where the T-shirts are kept together, pants together, underwear together, shorts together and dresses kept together, will make it more accessible for the child. The child needs to learn through his experience of making a choice. So, it will be a good idea to start with a choice of two sets of accessible clothing – then four and so on.

In the beginning dressing him up will be a collaborative effort, gradually he shall need less guidance. Taking ownership over their clothes from

wearing to washing, drying and arranging them in their cupboard, begins with role modelling, then collaboration and then it works towards independence.

Apart from dressing, it is also important to plan ahead and give him sufficient time to get ready by himself. An appropriate sized stool to sit on when changing, a basket for soiled clothes within his accessibility, will all help him towards gaining independence. We need to give him the opportunity to make choice and never substitute his will with ours. If he has made a choice, we must allow it and stick to it rather than manipulate it.

Eating

Independence with eating can begin very early by weaning at around 6 months. Initially, in order to make a smooth transition, offer drops of juice, lentil soup, vegetable soup, and then breast feed. Be consistent with this routine, gradually the child shall start having more liquid foods and less of breast feed. From then on, gradually increase the variety and quantity. We can begin by giving semi solid food first and then solid food.

When it comes to supporting the child with eating independently, food has to be an offering to the child. It will help to include the child in the entire process - preparation for the meal, cooking, laying the table, serving and then cleaning up. Here too, the accessibility to cutlery, plates, bowls, glasses, to the dining table, plays an important role in gaining independence. The comfort at the dining table must also be considered. Giving him an opportunity to work with glass, ceramic and different materials sends an important message to the child that he is capable, he is included.

Giving children a choice of what to eat also leads to independence. By role modelling what to eat and what choice we make, we guide the children towards independence. Choosing things that are healthy over taste at times, also guides them in making healthy choices. Children also need guidance on how much to serve. Here again, role modelling and serving very little and serving multiple times to avoid waste, gives the child the message of how much to serve himself.

Eating with independence also depends on the accessibility of the food. Having ease of access to drinking water and snacks will give an idea that there is food and water for when I need it. Clearing out a space in the fridge for the child to access will also contribute towards independence. Having

family meals where the child can see the adult role modelling, collaborating and eating as a family, all leads to independence.

Personal grooming

Self-care attributes a lot towards independence. Setting up a routine is very essential for the child to be habituated to brushing teeth, bathing, combing his hair, washing hands and mouth before and after meals. However, all the things needed for these self-care routine must be accessible to the child. The idea is that he should have the opportunity to do things on his own.

Movement and Work

Freedom to move and moving with purpose contributes towards independence. The child could be provided with a clear designated area where he can work. A few materials needed for his work can be arranged on a shelf which is accessible to him. It is good idea to rotate the material kept on the shelf following the child's interest. A comfortable seating arrangement such as a table or chair or chowki to work on could help. In addition to furniture, mats on the floor also help designate a work space.

We must role model the importance of the workspace, the sanctity of that space to the child. We must ensure we show respect to the material by providing freedom with consistent limits. We must role model putting things away with collaboration and slowly stepping back leading the child towards independence.

Our role

In order to guide the child towards independence, we must prepare both ourselves and the environment for the child. We must prepare ourselves by understanding the child's drive towards independence. We could start by learning about how the child develops; then create the right environment to support that development. We must also understand that freedom without any limits does not work. A child learns from his own experience. When he is trying to do something by himself, we need to observe and intervene only when we feel he is misusing it, or is frustrated or when he looks around for help. Independence is a point of arrival. We work towards being independent.

Thus, if the child has been supported right from the beginning with a prepared environment and by adults who understand how the development unfolds - by providing liberty of movement, by giving him opportunities to optimize his experiences, to explore things; then by 3 years the child will be functionally independent in almost all aspects of

daily life. He will be independent in eating, moving about and expressing himself confidently, dressing himself and making considerable choices.

If the support continues, then, by 6 years he will further consolidate and refine the skills that he has acquired. He will be able to take responsibility, respect others and the environment and be a contributing member of his family.



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Certificate Courses in various countries in Asia. Neelima loves being with nature and enjoys hiking and trekking.

This article is based on a webinar organised by the Indian Montessori Foundation presented by Neelima Mhaskar on Saturday, June 13, 2020. Below are answers provided by the author to some of the questions raised by the participants.

Question: How to draw line between independence and discipline when the child keeps repeating a certain activity? How important is the analysis of movement while doing things in the house?

Answer: The child moves to learn. That is why the child has this urge to engage himself in practicing and repeating cycles of activities. He should be allowed to perform activities even if they serve no direct purpose. Only when we feel that he is misusing the things, we intervene. It is through these activities that he tries to coordinate himself. We need to understand that any spontaneous action performed by the child is for his development. The slowing down of the movements enables him to see the sequence involved and understand the movements. This aids in the child's own effort at developing coordination of movement.

Question: How can we help breastfeeding mothers self-feed children, especially when the child shows more interest in mother's milk than other foods?

Answer: Weaning is a process and it leads to independence with eating. When starting to wean, in order to make a smooth transition, drops of juice, lentil soup, vegetable soup, and then breast feed can be done. Be consistent

with this routine, gradually the child shall start having more liquid foods and less of breast feed. From then on, gradually increase the variety and quantity. We can begin by giving semi solid food first and then solid food.

Question: How to break the TV association while eating for a young child?

Answer: Involving the child in the whole process of preparing the meal-like peeling vegetables, then setting the table, having conversation about food, all draw attention of the mind to the food. Role modelling eating and family meals where the child sees adults collaborating also contribute to breaking the habit.

Question: Sometimes the child is so independent that he acts stubborn. He doesn't want anyone to help them even when we feel he needs it.

Answer: A child learns from his own experience. They train themselves to coordinate their movements by repetition. They also explore those movements in order to be independent with it. Role modelling the activity a few times with the child and then observing the child will help understand where the child needs help. When he is trying to do something by himself, we need to observe and intervene only when we feel he is misusing it, or is frustrated or when he looks around for help. Perhaps, when the whole activity is finished, showing how to clean up could also be done.

Question: When the child is always expecting the adult's help to put things away, how can we help the child become independent?

Answer: Doing everything in collaboration eventually leads to independence. Children want to collaborate in caring for environment as much as in other aspects. Role modelling by putting things away and maintaining an accessible space for everything helps child understand where things go. Involving the child in creating the space for things also leads to more involvement in putting things away.

Question: When will the child learn to sleep independently? Is that a milestone or how do we train?

Answer: Having a routine from very early on, the child's body rhythm also gets into a routine. This shall ensure that the sleep routine also falls in place. Sleeping area can promote independence right from birth. The bed must be in a way that the child can get on and off on his own when they

need to use the toilet, drink water and it also gives a message that the he can go to bed when he is sleepy or tired. This further aids independence. Independence can further be supported by involving the child, in making of the bed each morning. This can begin as a collaborative effort and the child can proceed to doing it himself. This does a lot to their self-esteem and confidence.

Question: To encourage self-dressing, should we encourage the child by prompting by saying 'let us button your shirt', or should we let them show interest first?

Answer: To encourage self-dressing, it is important to offer the child a choice of accessible clothing. Limited choice, starting with just two sets to choose from and then moving to four sets and so on will also encourage self-dressing. Children learn a lot through experience of making choices. In the beginning, dressing your child will be a collaborative effort; gradually they will need less help. Following the child's interest and taking it forward will help them accomplish the task better. When the child makes an effort, observing the child and offering the right help is crucial.

Question: How do we support purposeful movement in the dining and cooking area? Please share some insights on how to prepare the environment for the child at home during these times?

Answer: When it comes to preparing the environment for the child, accessibility is one of the main aspects to consider. To involve them in cooking or preparing the meal is another aspect. The knives, peelers and cutting board have to be of a size that is suitable for them to use. They could be shown how to use it, by us role modelling it and then keeping it available for them in an accessible place. We could also include the child in the entire process - preparation for the meal, cooking, laying the table, serving and then cleaning up. Here too, the accessibility to cutlery, plates, bowls, glasses, to the dining table, plays an important role in gaining independence. It could be kept in a low shelf where it can be reached by the child. Giving the child an opportunity to work with real things such as a working knife, glass, ceramic and different materials sends an important message to the child that he is capable, he is included.