



Developing independence when it feels positively risky

by Michael Grose

Most parents I meet love the notion of promoting self-sufficiency in their children. However there are a number of barriers to overcome when it comes to putting the concept into practice.

Time is a common barrier. Let's face it, when time is at a premium it can be simpler to make their lunch/get them out of bed/sort out their friendship problem than leaving these things for them to do. Somehow we need to strike a balance between doing things for them and allowing them the time and space to do things for themselves.

Another common barrier to independence-building is a negative parental attitude to risk. Our natural protective instinct to keep our kids safe can at times switch to overdrive, particularly when events such as the recent Manchester terrorist attacks occur. While we all feel vulnerable at these times, we need to be careful that we don't smother or restrict our children's natural need to take positive risks in their pursuit of self-sufficiency.

We need to allow kids to take positive risks and extend their horizons, their capabilities and their range of social and physical experiences.



Create cut-down versions

If you feel decidedly nervous about letting go and allowing your kids to experience the positive risks associated with expanding their horizons, then I suggest you borrow a strategy that all major sporting codes are using to hook kids of all ages to their code. Namely, create a 'junior' version of the game, skill or experience that you want them to have.

Most modern sports have developed modified versions of their games allowing children from very young ages to participate. Australian Rules, for instance, has removed tackling, reduced the number of players in a team and made grounds smaller so that boys and girls as young as six can participate. This gives younger children the chance to experience Aussie Rules in bite-sized, manageable chunks.

There are countless opportunities to create cut-down versions of routine activities to bring them into the reach of children. For instance, a cut-down version of making a bed for a three-year-old could be smoothing the doona and arranging teddies and a pillow. As a child gains in competence you can add some complexity to the bed-making. (This doesn't involve risks but it's a great skill to learn.)

Similarly, a six-year-old can learn to walk to school on his or her own by being accompanied half way by an adult until they feel comfortable and become competent enough to go the full journey on their own.

A teenager who begins to go out at night can cut her teeth on sleepovers and other supervised gatherings before going to parties and activities without adult supervision.

When kids ask, assist their independence

As a general rule, when a child or young person asks if they can do something new or something that extends their boundaries, then a parent who works from an independence-building mindset should look to put steps in place to assist them to achieve their goal. Often the easiest step is to create a cut-down version of the real thing to help kids develop the confidence and competence they need.

Anxious and low risk-taking kids

Creating a cut-down version is a fantastic strategy to enable anxious, nervous and low risk-takers to gain the skills and confidence they need to overcome their fears and anxieties. Kids who are overly anxious or fearful about approaching new social situations need to face their fears rather than avoid the situation altogether. If they continually avoid situations that bring on anxiety then they'll always struggle.

If it's a birthday party that's causing intense worry then use a cut-down version so your child only needs to go for the first hour rather than the whole party. You can scaffold their way to independence by arranging for them to go with a friend beforehand, and to stay with that friend until they feel comfortable moving away. You can also create a cut-down version of a party at home with just siblings, rehearsing how they can introduce themselves and play with others. This may sound contrived but these types of activities are invaluable for helping anxious kids gain mastery over unfamiliar social situations.

Parents have always found ways to make skill acquisition and self-sufficiency easy for kids to master. When the reach for independence involves risk then we can all feel a little edgy. Creating junior versions of the real thing is one way we can help kids become more independent while reducing (rather than totally eliminating) the element of risk.



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