

The language of Independence

By Michael Grose

Independence-building is vitally important for parents. It's the pathway to children's competency, confidence and creativity, and the short cut to resilience and real learning.

Families always develop shared language around the values that have strong meaning for them. If resilience is a shared value then there invariably will be a strong set of words and phrases about resilience factors such as coping, flexibility and perseverance.

Similarly, the values of independence and self-sufficiency are reflected in a family's proprietary language. In fact, it's through shared language that culture exists. If you are looking to building a culture of independence in your family then creating your proprietary language around independence is a great way to start.

These following twelve examples of independence-building language, and the principles behind them, will help you create your own family's language.

1. Never regularly do for a child the things a child can do for him or herself

Goal: Independence

This is perhaps the original parenting-for-independence manifesto, and it's a philosophy that guides many teachers and parents today. In effect, this sentence means that wherever possible - we give children the skills and competencies to look after themselves physically and emotionally. It requires a great deal of patience, time and courage from parents and teachers as the sentence is easier to say than to put into practice. But it's a worthy guiding principle that leads to self-sufficiency in children, and ultimately redundancy as parents.

2. "Is this something you can do?"

Goal: Self-help

Independence takes many forms but perhaps the most common is the development of self-help skills. The confidence, pride and, for most, sheer pleasure that kids doing the simple things for themselves such as a toddler tying his shoelaces or a child making her own lunch is immeasurable. Yet it is so easily denied by well-meaning parents and adults who see it as their job to do everything for children. Independence begins at home with the development of self-help skills.



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3. "Have you checked the help roster today?"

Goal: Contribution

A great way to develop a sense of independence is to give kids opportunities to help out at home. There is no need to overburden children with jobs, but a sensible allocation of chores according to their age and study requirements is not only a great help to you, but fantastic training for them. It also builds accountability and a work ethic, both highly valued characteristics for continuing success at school and later in life.

4. "Which of these two would you prefer?"

Goal: Decision-making

Parents as wise leaders need to call the shots on how the family life is conducted, including health and welfare issues such as appropriate bed and bath times. Some things are not up for negotiation. But there are areas where parents can rightfully hand autonomy to children and say, 'It's your call!' Choice of clothes, how they keep their bedroom, what they eat and who they play with are the types of decisions they can make. Naturally, this is age-related and you do need to have some influence on their choices.

5. "How can you make this happen?"

Goal: Problem-solving

Kids get used to bringing their problems to parents to solve. If you keep solving them, they'll keep bringing them. A problem-solving approach relies on asking good questions, which can be challenging if you are used to solving your child's problems. The first question when a child brings you a problem should be: 'Can you handle this on your own?' Next should be, 'What do you

want me to do to help you solve the problem?' These questions are not meant to deter children from coming to you; rather, to encourage and teach them to start working through their own concerns themselves.

6. "We rely on you to do this."

Goal: Reliability

Reliability is closely connected to responsibility and other aspects of independence. Every child over the age of five, at the eldest, should do something that someone else relies on whether it's looking after a pet, clearing the meal table or emptying the garbage on a regular basis. Having others rely on you has its challenges and can be a learning curve. They'll inevitably forget to put the rubbish bins out on garbage night, meaning your bin will be overflowing for the next week. They'll need to be reminded about feeding the pet or clearing the table. Kids inevitably won't get things right, but that doesn't mean we should stop giving them responsibilities.

7. "What can you learn for next time?"

Goal: Self-sufficiency

Learning from mistakes is part of the independence-building process for children. Often adult impatience or unwillingness to put up with errors prevents us from giving kids the chance to do things for themselves or take real responsibilities. If independence is to be a major part of your family's culture then it's imperative that we help kids learn from their mistakes whether social, behavioural or just messing up while helping out at home.



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8. "How do you feel about this?"

Goal: Emotional intelligence

An often over-looked aspect of independence is the ability to self-manage your emotional state. Emotional self-management starts with the recognition of how you feel about a particular event or action and then labelling that feeling. If possible prompt to identify their emotions before they act on them. You can also revisit events and ask children about the feelings that may have led to a certain behaviour such as hurting or yelling at a sibling.

9. "When you muck up, you make up."

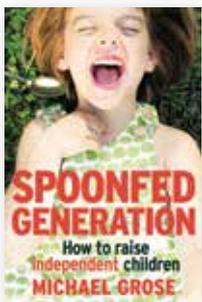
Goal: Accountability

Kids of all ages will make mistakes. In fact, mucking up is part of the learning process. But kids will just repeat their mistakes unless they experience the consequences of their decisions. The use of behavioural consequences is a way of teaching children to take greater responsibility for their lives and to learn to make smarter choices.

10. "How will you fix this?"

Goal: Restoring relationships

Independent kids are usually socially-smart kids who don't operate in a bubble. They know that their behaviour impacts on others they are mindful of the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of others. They also make amends or restore relationships when their behaviour impacts negatively on others.



Special note: I'm thrilled to announce that my latest book *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children* is out. It's available at parentingideas.com.au

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Relationship restoration is a lifelong skill and involves the following: swallowing your pride, making up, giving something back, not holding a grudge and moving on.

11. "You need to do what's right, not what's easy."

Goal: Integrity

A sense of integrity is important for a child's independence because it's the basis of reasoned and socially focused self-control and self-management. The job of parents is to move their children from 'Me' to 'We'. Integrity is the great socialising agent for a child. They may get by without courage, endurance and grit but they won't get far socially without integrity.

12. "Let's find a way to make this happen."

Goal: Positive risk-taking

One of the ways to develop independence is to work with them to build their skills and abilities to safely navigate an ever-broadening environment outside of the relative safe confines of their home. Ideas include adults and kids doing things together such as catching public transport until they are ready to go it alone or with friends; and giving kids smaller freedoms that lead to bigger liberties such as allowing a young child to walk part of the way to school on their own and then extending the distance as they get more experience and feel more confident.

Independence-building is vitally important for parents. It's the pathway to children's competency, confidence and creativity, and the short cut to resilience and real learning. We've gradually retreated from this approach over recent generations much to our children's detriment. It's time to help kids reclaim their independence. Getting our language right is a good place to start as family change always begins with shared language.



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