

Flexibility and Independence

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Over my 29 years at Merricat's, hundreds of children have transitioned into our preschool, grown and learned while here, transitioned into elementary school and beyond, and in some joyous cases, come back as parents of preschoolers themselves. I have observed children who consistently had difficult transitions and, also, those who seemed to move seamlessly through their education. Creating a peaceful, joyful and most productive journey has been my focus.

What skills are the most important in creating a happy and able student? Without any empirical data, but using lots of observational data, high degrees of flexibility and independence seem to be amongst the most important skills we can build and encourage in our students. With flexibility and independence, children are empowered to cope with, and even enjoy the unexpected, and take ownership of the multitude of learning experiences along their school path.

Tackling Transitions

When educators and parents think about the transition from preschool to elementary school, many of us think about the child's pre-academic skills and the readiness to conquer the more focused academics such as reading, writing and mathematics. But many factors play a role in the actual teaching and learning of all these skills. There are really no two schools or two teachers or two classes that are the same. For example, a teacher might be rigid about the way in which the students are asked to sit at desks. A student with a high degree of flexibility, who has been asked to move outside his comfort zone many times, will easily adapt to the slight discomfort of sitting at a desk. A child who has always been catered to and accommodated might have difficulty sitting in an uncomfortable way. No matter how academically skilled, an unhappy child is not a productive student.

An elementary school teacher might require that students listen to verbal directions and follow those directions immediately. A highly independent child will easily follow those directions or, perhaps more important, ask for assistance or clarification if he needs it. The child who has always had adult assistance in living and learning experiences might not be able to process directions and independently move into

the teacher's assignment. If he does not know how to appropriately ask for assistance, he might feel anxiety in this situation.

Empowering independent experiences in toddler and preschool years can enhance a child's level of independence going forward. In the preschool, we can set up the physical space, the structure of the day, and the classroom curriculum to offer children constant challenges and successes. We can present a learning environment in which they can continuously develop self-help skills and access materials needed for both directed and non-directed play and work. At the same time, we can build in many opportunities in the curriculum for children to experience moments of ease, moments of slight challenge, and moments of real frustration. Trusted and supportive teachers must always be nearby and ready to encourage children to troubleshoot and identify possible strategies for enhanced enjoyment and learning.

Flexibility at Home

Flexibility, while often contradictory to many parenting practices, can be worked on at home. The most important thing for parents to remember is that they must show flexibility if they would like their children to be flexible. If parents truly desire a child who can happily adjust to unexpected circumstances, then a strict routine might not be the road to get there.

A baby who is always put to nap or sleep in the exact same room, with perhaps complete quiet, or maybe complete darkness, might not be able to nap on an airplane, or at a relative's home. Once a basic sleep routine is established, making frequent slight changes can enable the child to sleep in many situations. Along the same lines, a rigid naptime or bedtime can dictate a child's schedule for many years. If a child is constantly told that a particular time of day is meant only for sleep, it might be tricky to ask the child on a random day, perhaps for a family celebration, to be alert and playful during that time. Instead, a parent can intentionally have a child miss a nap, or make a bedtime later on occasional days. On those days, a simple comment like, "Wow, you didn't take a nap today and you were still able to play and have fun," reinforces that even when tired a child can function normally. This encourages adaptive behavior.

Flexibility skills can also be encouraged in a toddler's eating, feeding and meal times. Parents might desire their child to be able to follow restaurant or party etiquette at a young age; being able to sit at a dinner table is a great skill for a child to have. But, of course, every party is different, with different food, different surroundings. If we want a

child to be successful in all these settings, it is helpful to vary a child's experiences at home. Giving children food whenever they ask for it is often the easiest thing to do. But, beginning at a young age, it is helpful at times to tell a child that food will not be served until mealtime. And, it is a good idea to have a child sit at the table for just longer than the child is most comfortable.

In situations where a child might need to wait to eat, or to sit at a table for longer than usual, offering preferred food is a good idea. At other times, during more routine meals, giving small amounts of new healthy food is a way to expand a child's palate. If a child tastes something and doesn't like it, a simple, "You tried tofu and you didn't care for it," reinforces that trying foods is good, while not liking everything is perfectly acceptable. If a child continues to eat the newly introduced food, a comment such as, "I noticed you've eaten some of the broccoli," can be gently supportive. These everyday moments at mealtimes can help foster flexibility throughout other times of day and can be carried into the future.

Aside from sleep and eating routines and practices, there are so many ways to encourage flexibility in young children. Rather than offering preferred toys to a child, occasionally suggesting that a new toy or material be used is great opportunity for a child to learn adaptive behavior and to discover a new material. If the child continues to ask for a preferred toy (or even shows distress), a simple comment like, "We're going to play with blocks right now," is often enough. If the child responds and uses the new material for any amount of time, take note: "You wanted to play with your trucks, but you built an interesting structure with these blocks." It is perfectly consistent and reinforcing to then take out the original preferred toys and simply say, "First you built with the blocks. Now let's play with your trucks." All of these statements should be spoken in a matter-of-fact way, suggesting that being flexible is a normal behavior, not one to be unduly celebrated.

Opportunities for Independence

In thinking about increasing a child's independence skills, a parent can present endless opportunities for a child to develop over time. For example, as soon as a child can walk, she can be encouraged to walk from one location to another (within reason). If a child is always picked up, even when it would be easy for her to walk, she might think that adults prefer for her to be reliant on a grown-up. At least some of the time, it is helpful when a toddler asks to be carried to simply say, "Right now, use your own feet to walk." As a child gets stronger, leaving a

stroller at home can send a clear message that a parent has confidence in the child's ability to walk. A parent does have to be sure that leaving a stroller at home should only be done when the walk is actually an appropriate distance for the child. Even if a child is expressing some complaints about a walk, an easy statement at the destination like, "Your strong body and feet got you here," will be encouraging for the next time.

There are other obvious ways to motivate a toddler or preschooler to utilize self-help skills. Once again, this has to be a conscious decision on the part of the family, as it might involve less-than-perfect performance when a child is doing things on her own. For instance, arrange the child's living environment to include accessible toys, books and materials, as well as easy clean-up opportunities like photograph-marked bins, accessible trash bins, and step stools for hand washing at sinks. Once the environment is set up for independent activities, a parent can gradually request and expect a child to do simple things on her own. For example, a 2-year-old can easily put a dirty napkin or tissue in the trash can. For the first few times, it is easy to model the process while saying, "After you use the tissue, pick it up and put it in the trash basket." The next few times, the parent can use the language describing the task, perhaps while pointing at the tissue or napkin. When it is clear the child knows what to do with the dirty tissue, a parent might merely say, "You know what to do with the dirty tissue." Once the child independently puts garbage in the trash can, it is supportive to say, "I noticed that you know just what to do with the dirty tissue. I know you'll put your trash in the can next time, too." Making more and more daily living tasks a child's responsibility will feel natural to a child if she sees you doing many of these simple tasks yourself. Again, it is important not to make the completion of these tasks a celebration, but rather a regular course of expected events.

If a parent notices that a child does something on her own, such as putting clothes on in the morning without being reminded, it is helpful to say something positive about the way the child got the task done. Again, not a celebration, but a simple comment such as, "You got dressed by yourself, and I didn't even remind you. That's very grown-up behavior." A parent might add, "Because you got dressed by yourself, I was able to get my work done. Now we have extra time to read a story." But if the child is told that she did not get dressed properly, the parent signals to the child that she is not able to do this task independently. If, for instance, a child puts on summer clothes in the winter, it's better to

say, “These are perfect clothes for inside. When we go out later, I am sure you can put on a sweater for the cold weather.”

Taking Responsibility

Independence is also about empowerment. A child will feel empowered when he does things for himself, but also, should be encouraged to feel confident asking for assistance when it is actually needed. If a child asks for help after trying to complete a task by himself, he can be supported by saying, “You tried to put on your shoes yourself, and then you clearly asked me to help. Of course I can help!” If a parent truly thinks the child can do a particular task on his own, language such as, “I challenge you to put your toys away on your own,” might be a supportive push. If the child does try, and still requires help, it is encouraging to say, “You tried on your own and then you asked me for help in a clear voice. We got it done together.”

As a child moves through toddler years, then preschool years, and then elementary school years, it is obvious that self-help skills should increase at home and then translate to the school environment. Along the same lines, responsibility for communal tasks in the home (and school) ought to increase as well. For example, taking responsibility for household cleanup, even if the child did not participate in making the mess, ought to be an expected behavior. As always, it is helpful to make a factual statement, such as, “The kitchen table is covered with papers, so let’s clean it up before we eat.” Making it normal to assist family members or participate in family chores helps to introduce in our children the idea that our responsibilities are not only related to our own actions, but also the bigger community. This development is the organic start of friendly, community-minded interactions.

Preparing for the Unpredictable

It is my observation that children with higher levels of flexibility and independence seem to have a smoother road in school, starting from the earliest years and moving forward. Teachers, classmates and classrooms will be different each year. Material to be learned can never be uniformly simple or interesting or pleasant.

Given so many variables, the best we can do is to try to prepare our children to be ready for everything that will come their way. The only predictable aspect of a child’s academic and social experience in school is that the teachers, fellow students and material are going to be unpredictable. Helping our children develop a high level of

independence and a hearty degree of flexibility arms them with the tools to navigate and find success in all of their educational settings.

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