

Ages and stages of independence

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From a 2-year-old crying "I can do it myself" as he struggles to put on his coat to a young teen begging to go to the mall with friends, children go through milestones and stages of life exerting their independence. And that's as it should be.

"One of the most important roles of a parent is to raise children who will become independent individuals," says Dr. Frank Sileo, licensed psychologist and executive director of The Center for Psychological Enhancement in Ridgewood.

But how does a parent know when a child is ready for independence? Ahead are some guidelines for many important milestones and tips on how to help everyone make it through. ♦

Crawling

It will probably start with rocking at about 7 to 10 months. Once baby's muscles are strengthened, off he'll go on hands and knees or even scooting on his bottom or belly. Christa Zimmerman's son started with a one-arm pull before he used all his limbs. He was hesitant at first, but an iPod placed just out of reach got him moving. "He took the bait," the Edgewater mom says.

Feeding

It's a messy proposition, but at around 8 or 9 months it's time to give baby a crack at feeding herself, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends. For several months, hands are the best utensils. It's not until about 18 months, if the child seems interested, that she might be ready to hold a spoon. But don't expect her to be able to use it well for a while, because control from plate to mouth might take a while. Also, make sure the plate has suction cups or a no-skid bottom.



7 to 10 months



8 to 9 months





Potty Training

One of the most dreaded and frustrating milestones in toddlerhood is potty training. While some little ones might show an interest in the potty as young as 18 months, most will be 2 or 2½ before they're ready to begin the process. Signs that they are ready include showing interest, being able to help dress and undress themselves, and an interest in wearing "big kid" underwear.

Although there are many methods, one thing to remember is to always be encouraging, says Maria Stavrou, owner and director of The Little School of Waldwick. "They're anxious to be big kids," she says, "and encouragement and small rewards like stickers mean a lot to them."

When Cliffside Park's Jamie Biegeleisen was potty training her toddler, she started by letting him pick out his own underwear at the store. Then she threw out all his diapers. "We stuck around the house for about 5 or 6 days, put down big towels and gave him lots of liquids," she says. After day three, he stopped having accidents, and by day five, they stopped asking him all the time whether he had to go. "Pull-ups were used at night. He got a sticker for every time he urinated and a small toy for every bowel movement."

Sharing

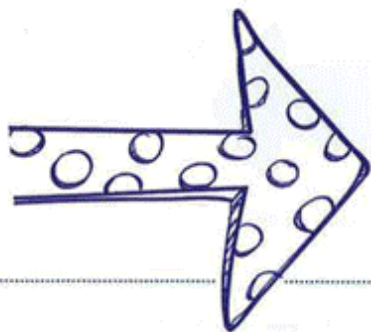
Being in a preschool setting helps when it comes to learning about self-control and respect for others. "Kids have what I call 'the disease to please,'" The Little School's Stavrou says. "They want adult recognition and approval." By age 3, they have a better sense of their identity and are aware of themselves, they can control their emotions more, are ready to be part of a group, play more side by side with other children, and are learning how to take turns and share. A preschool with structure and set rules along with a balance of play and learning is the best environment to nurture those important traits, she says.



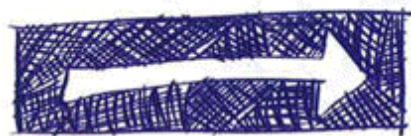
Coats, Buttons And Zippers

Who hasn't endured an epic battle at the door with a coat and a 2-year-old? It requires a lot of deep breaths and patience. By 3, Stavrou says, with a little help and "magic," they should be doing it with little assistance. "We tell them, 'I can teach you a magical way to put on your coat,'" she says.

Here's the trick: Lay the coat on the floor, open side up, arms out. Have your child stand at the top, bend down and put her arms in the jacket, then flip it over her head. "They suddenly have it on and they can't believe it happened," she says. By ages 4 to 5, they should be able to zipper and button up on their own as well.



18 months
to 3 years



3 years