

Ten Rules for Raising Independent Kids

By Kristen Howerton

1. **Don't always step in.** Show your kids how to do something (tying their shoes, braiding their hair, getting dressed) and then let them attempt it on their own the next time. They may struggle — they will struggle — but struggle is part of the learning process, and it makes them feel confident in themselves once they do get it right. Besides, your kids' teachers will be extremely appreciative if they don't have to help with backpacks, coats, zippers, shoelaces, hand-washing, trash clean-up, and nose-blowing.

2. **Let them experience failure.** It's hard to let your kids fail. But every time they fail at something, they learn to keep trying. They learn how to change it for the next time. They learn to handle their emotions when they fail and move past it. Failure teaches kids to succeed.

3. **Encourage Thinking.** If you always tell your kids exactly what to do, they'll never learn how to think through a situation and make a decision for themselves. Asking questions is a good way to help them along: What could you do differently next time? What would be a better choice than hitting your brother when you're mad at him? What would you want others to do if they saw you fall down at recess?

4. **Be Honest with Them.** We've all complained about it, but how often do we overdo it with our own children by telling them they are "the best" at everything? Not only is it untrue, but it's also unhelpful for their self-esteem. Kids are observant. They notice other kids. They can see if someone else is better than they are at skateboarding or drawing or reading. Instead of trying to build self-esteem with false praise, let it build on its own by encouraging your kids to do THEIR best. Push them to succeed where they might have failed before. A kid with good self-esteem will feel confident enough to take risks and be independent.

5. **Be a good example.** We have to realize that, because kids are always watching — ALWAYS — we are teaching them things all the time. They learn from us how to attempt something new with a good attitude. They learn from us how to respond to stress. They learn from our example about proper use of technology. Which means, if you want to limit your own kids' screen time to encourage them to play outside, read, or do something creative, then you can't be buried in your own phone all day long.

6. **Set a routine.** A routine is helpful in so many areas for kids, because it helps them know when things are happening and what's expected of them. Bedtime is a perfect example. Set a bedtime routine and stick to it. Practice it every night. Enforce it every night. Pretty soon, kids will be performing as much of that routine as possible on their own. Independent bedtime routines equal a little downtime for mom and dad and result in more independent kids.

7. **Get out without them.** Remember those days before kids, when you went out with friends or your spouse all the time? When you can afford to, start doing it again! Kids will learn that they are fine with a sitter. They can play and go to bed without mom or dad around. It may take a few attempts for some little ones, but trust me—everyone benefits. Parents get time to connect with each other or friends, and kids learn it's not the end of the world to be separated from mom and dad.

8. **Ask their opinion.** Whether you really need it or not, asking your child's opinion helps them in a couple of important ways. First, they learn to form an opinion on their own, which encourages independent thinking. Second, it shows them that their opinion matters to you. Like the other rules in this list, that boosts their self-esteem.

9. **Give them chores.** No one likes chores, but they are an important aspect of a responsible life. Kids have to be responsible for their things at school, so they can be responsible at home as well. Start your kids off with small tasks, like putting away their toys or taking their utensils to the sink after a meal. Gradually, introduce bigger chores...like doing their own laundry. When you expect your kids to help with age-appropriate chores — especially ones that involve their stuff — kids learn that they are actually capable of taking care of things themselves. Independent kids become independent teenagers, who then become responsible adults.

10. **Don't force it.** Every kid is different. Some will be naturally independent, and some will not. For those kids who need a little extra help, it takes a lot of practice on their part. It takes encouragement from you. It takes love and patience all the way around, but it will be worth it. Start down the path of creating independent kids, and you'll see a big difference before you know it.