

A Year of Transition



Developing Independence and Resilience

As children move through nursery and into school the expectation is that they will be able to do more for themselves. At home and in early years settings children share adult attention with a small group of siblings or peers. When they start school the number of adults in the classroom will probably be less than they have been used to. Children will have to rely less on adults to do things for them. Developing independence skills increases a child's self-esteem and confidence and in the longer term will decrease frustration. Children who are used to doing things for themselves will be more likely to try new things, cope with small failures, explore and investigate - all characteristics of effective learning that improve a child's educational outcomes.

A child who is encouraged to become more independent will, naturally, not always be successful first time in every task. Learning to cope with failure, to work out what went wrong or accept they need to practice and try again are vital skills in developing resilience. Resilient children face and deal with problems and move on positively. It is an attribute that supports good mental health.

Ideas to support children to develop independence

- Make sure your learning environment allows children to independently access resources without asking. Can they reach everything? Get down to their level to check. Try setting up areas specifically for developing these skills, such as a tissue station, with a box of tissues and a lidded bin, or providing dressing up clothes or dolls clothes with buttons and zips to practice on.
- Break new skills into smaller chunks and teach one at a time. Try teaching the last part of the skill first and work backwards. This means that the child always gets to finish the task themselves and can celebrate success.
- Allow lots of time for children to practice skills for themselves. It doesn't matter if the end result is not perfect. Work with parents to stress the importance of this at home too. It is more important that a child has dressed themselves than that their outfit matches!
- Offer lots of praise when the child attempts something for themselves rather than for the success of the attempt.
- Consider what the child can already do and build on that. This is just as true for children with SEND. What is the barrier stopping a child from doing something independently? Could you provide a different resource or work out a different method of doing the task?

For instance, if a child struggles to pick up an object such as their cup from the table would a rubber mat stop it sliding about? Does the child need a step or toilet seat insert to help them use the toilet? Would the child with Autism find it easier to hang up their own coat if you put their peg on the end of the row, rather than crowded in the middle of the cloakroom?

- Consider which skills are most motivating to the child, then teach these skills first. For instance, if the child loves to play outside, then teaching them to put on their own coat in order to go out might offer more motivation than teaching them to use a knife and fork. Consider also which skills are useful for their family and for going to school.
- Display some visual reminders, using pictures or photos to show how to complete a simple routine, such as washing hands or flushing the toilet. These can be useful at home too. Visual timetables, choice boards and now/next boards can also help children develop independence and understand what will happen next. They are especially useful for children with poorer understanding of language.

Ideas to support children to develop resilience

- Ensure that children's initial separation from their family, when they settle in with you, is a positive experience. If that experience is managed well, the child is likely to cope better with the next big change of leaving you and going to school. Help children to experience small positive changes regularly, such as moving the snack table, offering a different cup or a having different practitioner read the story. For most children this will help them accept change more easily. It may help some children if you let them help with the change (for instance letting them decide where to move a table, letting them help decorate the Xmas tree etc) rather than springing it on them.
- Some children might benefit from the use of social stories to help them understand what is going to happen.
- Help children to develop a strong support network of peers. Offer lots of opportunities for collaborative play. Being with friends, even if moving to an unfamiliar setting such as school, will help children to deal with the change. Even if a child goes to a school with a new set of children, the ability to get along with their peers and make new friends will help them to quickly settle in. Feeling like they are part of a group helps a child's emotional resilience.
- Help children to develop emotional self-regulation. Talk about and model how you deal with things when they go wrong. Use humour and show how you can laugh at your mistakes. This shows the children that even adults can sometimes fail, and that it is OK. For instance, "I was silly not to put on my wellies, now I've got wet feet!"
- Set small challenges and problem-solving tasks to offer opportunities for children to try new things, make decisions and experience occasions where they may not initially succeed.
- Encourage parents to let children sometimes make small decisions for themselves, such as what to wear, what to eat for breakfast or which way to walk to nursery.
- Don't let a child hear you say "He/she will need help with this". In supporting the development of independence and resilience adults will often need to watch and wait. Jumping in too early to do the task for the child discourages self-reliance, yet leaving it so long that the child becomes frustrated and gives up can discourage perseverance. An adult who knows the child well will be able to strike this careful balance.