

parenting *ideas insights



Developing independence in secondary school

By Michael Grose

Practical independence-building ideas to encourage autonomy in adolescents.

The ultimate goal for an adolescent is to achieve autonomy from their parents. They are trying to do this at a tricky time, with their brain going through fundamental changes in the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for rational decision-making, thinking things through and impulse control. As a result, you need to carefully support your child's journey to independence through this stage.

Your young adolescent should be expected to help at home. However, consider giving them one or two significant weekly jobs, such as putting out the garbage, rather than continuing the same chores they were given during the previous 'latency' stage. More of the same doesn't always work with this age group.

Here are some more practical independence-building ideas:

1. Negotiate independence

Give your young adolescent the chance to negotiate greater independence by allowing them to prove to you that they are ready to have their boundaries pushed out. This is the age when you can build 'scaffolds' to greater independence: allow your child to achieve increasingly greater autonomy, taking lots of small steps rather than one large step.

2. Talk about values

Discuss values of fairness, tolerance and respect with your young person to help them formulate a sense of responsibility and a positive value system. Be clear about your expectations of their behaviour when they are not with you. Discuss the consequences of breaking these rules. And help your young person also to assess the risks associated with increased independence.

3. Allocate a meal each week for your young adolescent to prepare

You may help them at first, but eventually turn the responsibility over to them. If this is unworkable for you now, consider it something to work towards by the end of this stage. Kids in this age group are more than capable of preparing a meal, and you will find it a significant contribution to the family. It may need to fit in with busy schedules, but that's okay – your child will benefit from learning that they can in fact juggle a number of activities each day. Don't let them off the hook just because they are busy.

4. Give them two allowances

Young people increasingly want more power over their own life, and providing pocket money is one way to do this. Consider giving your young person enough allowance to cover clothing, mobile-phone bills, travel and school meals.

Encourage them to budget, and set savings goals. This increase in autonomy will help your young person feel valued.

5. Encourage a part-time job (when they are old enough)

There are a number of benefits to a part-time job, regardless of how busy your young person is. First, earning their own allowance is one of their first steps toward real autonomy. Second, it's good for them to abide by rules set by someone other than their family and school. Third, being socially connected to a community group such as a workplace is a key contributor to good mental health and wellbeing.

As they move closer to school-leaving age patiently teach life skills such as paying bills and filling in tax returns to develop real independence. And resist taking on their problems. Your young person needs to learn to stand on their own two feet, which can mean they experience some of life's hardships. These are all good learning experiences.

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