

Start the way you want it to continue.

Independent or helpless?

For some funny reason, most people think that there is a time of “being a baby” - in which you treat babies as helpless, - and then there is a time when the baby “turns into a child.” At that time you switch what you have been doing and you treat the child differently because you want him or her to become independent.

Too late! If you treat babies as helpless, before you can say “where’s the dummy?” the babies will have learned helplessness, because they are such quick learners. Babies learn how to be helpless, they are not born helpless. They are born capable and wise in their own way, and the best time to start treating them as capable and wise is the day they arrive. The baby’s earliest learnings are the extremely powerful foundations upon which all else will sit. The early experiences physically wire up the baby’s brain, forming her view of herself, the world, and herself in the world. When put like that, it makes very good sense to go for “capable and independent” every time.

What are you teaching?

If you haven’t thought about it, it can be very easy to teach a baby to be helpless instead of capable and independent. Here are some of the things that people commonly do - or don’t do - because they haven’t thought through what each one teaches:

Yoo hoo, anybody home?

Just today I sat beside a Mother with her baby in a pram outside Sky City. The baby was smiling to his Mum, in a sustained attempt to communicate, and Mum’s mind was elsewhere. Who knows, she may have lost a fortune, but she also missed the treasure right before her eyes. And her son? Well he was pretty helpless in his best attempts to relate to “the-centre-of-the-universe,” a.k.a. Mum. Too much of that and he would not perceive himself as being a powerful and independent being. He would have to up the ante and try less charming ways of getting himself noticed, of making his mark in the world. And then we in turn might then say that he was naughty, and attention seeking.

Let me get it

Hanging toys and objects in the baby’s line of sight that she can neither get hold of to play with, nor get away from. (And let’s face it, some of those things they hang over babies are pretty darn ugly!) Wanting to play and explore with something so close, while never being able to, is as frustrating as playing piggy-in-the-middle. It’s powerlessness training.

Please let me get it

When there is a range of things to play with, let the babies choose what takes their interest.* Too many adults choose the thing to play with when babies are perfectly capable of making the right selections for themselves. When the baby chooses what is interesting to him, he is following his own internal promptings, learning what interests him, and how to follow that up. He will play with it until the internal promptings take his interest elsewhere. He is learning that he has the power to make choices in his life, an important step on the road to independence.

Please, please let me get it

When the baby is lying on her back on the floor, put the objects for her to choose to play with either side of her head. That way she can do what she can, she can turn her head to either side and she can choose. Already, with limited physical skills, she is learning independence. And on that note, putting things in babies’ hands when they are tiny prolongs the grasp reflex that they are born with, and which they must lose before they can make progress.

*Assuming that the range of things to choose from is baby friendly of course!

Please, pretty please, let me choose

Don't you hate it when you are watching a programme on the tele, you have gotten interested in it, and someone grabs the remote and 'hey presto,' you're watching something else? When we choose something we are interested in, we like to stay with it until we have lost interest in it. We are not that keen on having someone else inflict their interests onto us. It's the same for a baby. When babies have been allowed to choose what interests them, they need time to explore and play until they are not interested any more. Grown-ups often "change channels" on babies by picking up a toy and waving it in front of the baby when she was right in the middle of a "different programme." This lack of thought - and respect - teaches the baby that her choices aren't important, and that she does not need to entertain herself, someone will entertain her. A baby who learns to be entertained will want to be entertained. This is what my mother would have called "making a rod for your own back," because it actively discourages independence, and it stops the baby from growing her attention span.

Why do you want to see me stuck?

When you put a little baby on her tummy she is stuck. Helpless. The only things she can do - and is designed to do - with her body in these early days, she can't do. Because she is stuck. She cannot wave her arms and her legs, the two things she must do to get the balance of her axes of her body. Neither can she focus with her two eyes because one is squashed shut, and her jaw is compressed as well. This is helplessness training and if you put yourself in the baby's position, you would not like it.

The only position to **put** a baby into that does not teach helplessness and powerlessness is on the back, on the floor. Then babies can exercise as designed, they can follow the promptings which come from within, and they can work independently towards standing and walking. They will not skip any of the developmental stages so vital to later learning if they are in charge. Babies who have been 'stuck' into positions that they could not get into or out of by themselves - like on their tummy, propped into sitting, held to bounce and walk - miss stages which are vital for their physical, neurological, intellectual, emotional and psychological development. The other bonus of allowing your baby to follow his or her own promptings independently is perfect posture.

Stuck means stuck, and you can stick it

There are all sorts of ways of "sticking" a baby, and all of them are helplessness training. Stuck in the bouncinette, stuck in the high-chair, stuck in the (so-called) safety sleep, stuck in jumping-bouncing-exercising devices, stuck in baby swings, stuck in buggies and pushchairs, stuck in the car seat when the car seat is not in the car. A baby moves, on average, every thirty seconds. Watch a baby and see how often he changes position if he is not stuck. While we might say "of course babies are free and equal human beings - only smaller," we certainly have invented a lot of devices for them in which they will learn that they are not free. Not even free to move. They are not free to follow the messages arising from within, which they need to follow independently on their road to independence.

So start the way you want it to continue

Your baby is born wise and capable. She has everything she needs to grow into an independent child. All she needs is for you to think about how to support her in what she can do, so that she can learn to do more.

Treating babies with this kind of respect is not the norm in our society, so you will be doing things differently from others. And you will reap the rewards as a parent, especially when your infant turns into a toddler. Your baby won't need to demand his own way. The two of you will have been working out the partnership of two independent beings from day one. Toddlerhood won't be the battle that some people make it. It will be just another step in your journey together.