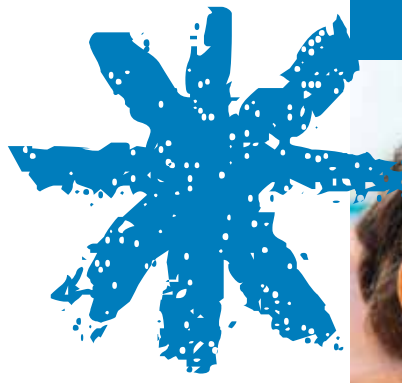


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insights



Developing independence in primary school

By Michael Grose

Practical ideas for parents to encourage real independence in children.

Your goal as a parent should be for your child to be completely self-managing by the end of primary school. That is, he can get himself and others up each morning; make his own breakfast; prepare his own schoolbag; collect his own school uniform; put any notes under your nose to be signed and returned to school; and so it goes on. Now, that doesn't

mean that kids will do all this all the time, because other factors come into play such as busy schedules and early starts; children will need some assistance at times. However, it's good to keep in mind that children, when left to their own devices, generally do remarkably well at organising their daily tasks. Sometimes they just need the opportunity.

Here are four practical ways to develop real independence in primary school-aged children:

1. Involve them in mealtimes

Mealtimes are the fulcrum around which healthy families operate. A shared meal is more than food. It's a ritual that binds people together; it's a vehicle for parents to influence their children; and it's an expression of love and care. It is also fundamental to children's wellbeing because there is a strong correlation between good mental health in young people and those who regularly share a family meal. Mealtimes also offer plenty of opportunities for children to help including running errands, preparing the meal, setting the table, clearing the table, packing the dishwasher and other jobs. There's something for everyone!

2. Use pocket money to develop independence

A regular allowance is a fabulous way to promote real independence in children. Start in lower primary school and gradually increase their allowance the older they become. Importantly, you need to increase the areas that their allowance covers. For instance, in lower primary school a child's pocket money might go towards the purchase of some sweets and one or two other items each week. However, in middle primary school it might increase to cover the cost of one or two lunch orders each week, their bus money and some treats.



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In later primary school it could even cover some of their clothing purchases as well. The important thing is not to cover for kids if, for instance, they don't budget appropriately and run out of money for school-canteen lunches. They can either make their own lunches at home or perhaps borrow from a sibling and repay out of their next allowance. Pocket money used well is a fantastic way to develop independence in kids.

3. Look after pets

It's a quirk of life that most children want a pet, but they just don't want to look after it in the long term. Many kids discover that following the initial flush of enthusiasm looking after a pet can be a grind – walking the family pooch, cleaning out the guinea-pig cage, or feeding the family feline. But pet care offers priceless lessons in the development of grit, responsibility and nurturance – all necessary attributes for independent success.

4. Walk, ride or take public transport to school

The opportunity to go to school on your own devices was a luxury that previous generations enjoyed. While it may have seemed at the time like something to be endured rather than enjoyed, most people I discuss this matter with look back with fondness and nostalgia.

For most people it meant freedom, friendship and fun. For a short time each day kids experienced a delicious type of freedom away from both teachers and parents – a time to muck around, dawdle and mess around with mates. It also gave kids some familiarity with their neighbourhood.

It's well established that currently more children are driven to school than ride or walk, which denies children the same opportunity for friendship, fun and freedom. Busy schedules, less child-friendly neighbourhood layouts and working parents are just some of the reasons that prevent kids walking to school. If possible, look for ways to allow your child to get to school on their own. It's fantastic for their independence and wellbeing. If children are too young, walk or ride with them some of the way until they are old enough and skilled enough to make the trip without you.

The age of opportunity

Children in this stage have an outward orientation and are exploring their place in the world. This is an age and stage for greater neighbourhood exploration, for taking on real responsibility and for developing personal confidence and efficacy before adolescence starts.



Visit our website for more ideas and information to help you raise confident and resilient young people.



Special note: I'm thrilled to announce that my latest book *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children* is out. It's available at parentingideas.com.au