

PROMOTING APPROPRIATE SELF RELIANCE IN CHILDREN

EPISODE 14



Key Principles

- Understanding goal orientation
- Moving from dependence to independence
- Setting up the physical environment

MEET... Amy and 14-month-old Evan. Amy enjoys being a mother so much that sometimes it can be hard for her to separate from Evan. She is working on helping Evan to become more self-reliant and more able to play independently.



Understanding goal orientation

In earlier episodes we learned that children's desire to belong and feel important in the family group motivates much of their behavior—and misbehavior. In *Episode 8*, we observed how Ryan used Karen's desire to avoid conflict by pulling her into power struggles and, in effect, forcing her to confront conflict between them. In *Episode 10*, we saw how Marina often controlled events, and when her mother finally did stick to a limit she had set, Marina escalated the situation by having a tantrum. Many parents of verbal children can readily accept that even a very young child can test and affect their parents as Ryan and Marina have. However, it can be harder to accept that infants or toddlers can have similar intention and capability. In this episode we see that indeed they can. In addition, we look at options parents can consider to handle these kinds of situations constructively.

Setting up the physical environment

In previous episodes we discussed ways that parent can structure the social environment to foster their children's healthy development. Limits, consequences, rules and routines, positive consistency and encouragement, good self-management and a number of other factors have a strong influence on a child's understanding of how the world works. These understandings in turn affect how the child behaves and the attitudes he brings to his interactions with other people. How the physical environment is structured can also play an important role in children's healthy development. For example, if the physical environment is disorganized or chaotic, its affect on a child can be similar to a household in which there are no established rules or routines. Just as rules and routines provide a sense of predictability and stability, a well-structured physical environment can help children develop new skills and a sense of competence. For example, storing children's toys and belongings in an accessible location allows them to make many choices on their own, fostering their self-

confidence and feelings of competence. Structuring the environment can also help children understand limits and boundaries. Adult or dangerous items that children should not have access to can be stored out of sight. From time to time, physical boundaries might need to be defined by gates or furniture to let children know that an area is off limits at a particular time.

Moving from dependence to independence

In *Episode 10*, we introduced the idea that one of your most important jobs as a parent is to help your child make a successful journey from the complete dependence of infancy to the complete independence of adulthood. Certainly, a parent's role in helping children develop skills, attitudes, habits and behaviors play a critical role in this journey. Moving from dependence to independence, though, is not just the child's journey. As children mature and acquire new skills, they become less dependent on their parents. For some parents, this change can be difficult. The closeness and special bond that developed during infancy shifts. To preserve the gratification of this special bond, some parents might unintentionally prolong their child's dependence. In this episode we see how one mother's efforts to foster her son's independence require her to reevaluate the nature of her closeness with her young son, and shift the bond she has established with him to one that will more appropriately foster his development.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Understanding goal orientation

Mom: the Favorite Toy

Amy sets Evan up in the living room with his toys so that she can make dinner without having him underfoot. Evan plays peacefully on his own for a while, then wanders into the kitchen to chat with Amy. The two chat. Amy is able to continue cooking. Then Evan drops his toy. This distracts Amy from her cooking and she pushes the toy toward Evan with her foot. After making a few other unsuccessful attempts to get Amy's attention, Evan drops the toy again in the same location where Amy pushed it toward him with her foot. As he drops it, he looks over at Amy to see if his prediction about dropping the toy in that spot will get his mom's attention. Soon, in his effort to get Amy's attention and participate in the real action (wherever Amy is!), Evan is sitting on the floor at her feet as she stands at the stove. Observing the sequence of Evan's behavior on videotape makes it clear to Amy that Evan has one very big goal: getting his mom's attention. Amy would like Evan to learn to play independently so she can cook without distractions. She also has safety concerns about Evan playing or hanging out below where she is using hot pots and



pans. In other situations, like the one involving the safety of putting a balloon in his mouth, Amy has been able to get Evans cooperation by being firm. She can use the same approach to help him understand that while she is cooking he can't play below her feet. However, Evan clearly will go to great lengths to stay in contact with his mom. To minimize this kind of contact, Amy can be more matter-of-fact when she does leave Evan to play independently, avoiding, for example, the little pat on the back that reminds Evan of her departure. Amy might also need to consider additional alternatives to ensure Evan's safety and give her the time and space she needs to prepare dinner.

Setting up the physical environment

Amy Considers Temporary Separation

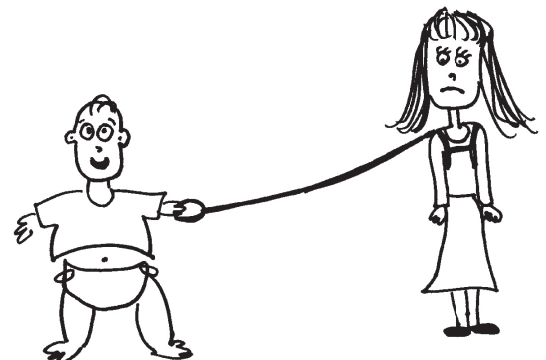
Evan's playtime in the kitchen is perhaps the most obvious example of confusion on his part about firm boundaries between him and his mother. However, there are a number of other activities which are less enjoyable or more difficult for Amy because Evan does not want to be apart from her. Mealtime, even after Evan has left the table, is not very enjoyable for Amy as Evan clings to her. Later, while Amy is relaxing in the living room, Evan tries to climb into her lap. When Amy goes into the kitchen to do the dishes, Evan is more interested in following her than in playing with his toys in the living room. At bedtime, Evan fusses, and Amy eventually picks him up and takes him to her bed so he will fall asleep. While Amy can set firm boundaries about where Evan needs to be at certain times of the day (e.g., in the living room playing, in bed sleeping, etc.), following through consistently with a reasonable consequence, if necessary, and setting up physical boundaries to support Amy's efforts are reasonable possibilities. A baby gate across the kitchen entry would allow Amy to cook and do dishes without interruptions from Evan. Amy can arrange toys near the gate on the living room side so Evan can see her while he plays. If necessary, the baby gate can also be used to give Amy time to eat a peaceful dinner. By introducing the gate for short periods of time at first, Amy can help Evan adjust to the change in procedures until it becomes more routine. It will be important for Amy to be very matter-of-fact in her use of the gate to ensure that Evan doesn't see its use as a punishment for having pestered his mother. One way to ensure this is for Amy to use the gate as soon as she begins cooking, not after Evan has come into the kitchen.



From dependence to independence ...

Baby Gate: Symbol of Separation

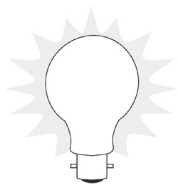
Amy has said that she finds being a mother so enjoyable and rewarding that it can be difficult for her to separate herself from Evan. We can see this clearly in the events that led up to a discussion of the possible need for a baby gate. In the long run, though, Evan will benefit from becoming more self-reliant. He is old enough to play alone in the living room while Amy makes dinner and does other chores. The use of a baby gate is one way to make relatively short-term separations clear and unconfusing for



Evan. And, in fact, a baby gate will not only help Evan accept increased separation. It will also help Amy. Structuring the physical environment will be a reminder to Amy that it is reasonable for her to have periods of separation from Evan and that Evan will benefit from the separation. In her interview with Dr. Morse, Amy made the comment that a baby gate would be a an “easy fix” for the need to establish boundaries between her and Evan. In fact, the baby gate is not necessarily an easy solution. Its use will probably raise anxiety and uncertainty for both Amy and Evan about being separated from each other. It is, however, a good symbol to remind Amy of the most basic purpose of her role as a mother: to foster Evan’s healthy transition from the complete dependence of infancy through the stages of increased independence he will need as he starts school, makes friends, gets his first job, and eventually becomes a self-sufficient adult.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Avoid giving attention when leaving.
- Recognize the true goals of children’s behavior.
- Children don’t need to be involved in everything.
- Physical barriers may be needed to promote independence.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. How do you think you’re doing in the area of encouraging your child’s independence? During the next week, look for one area where you are doing something for your child that he can either do for himself with his current skills or is ready to learn a new skill. Slowly transition from helping your child with this activity to giving him more and more responsibility, while teaching him any new skills that are needed. Remember to be encouraging, expect the best and make your time together enjoyable.
2. Do you wish you had a little more time when you were not the focus of your child’s attention? If you do, consider times when it is reasonable for your child to play independently, then establish a short time period when you will not be engaged with your child. Even several minutes can be a good starting point. Slowly increase the time by adding just a minute or two a day until your child is comfortable with the separation.