

Parenting: Raise Independent Children

Are you raising responsible or contingent children?

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One of your most important goals as a parent is to raise children who become independent and self-reliant people. Certainly, in early development, your children count on you. As infants, they rely on you for nourishment, cleaning, and mobility. As your children grow, they become more independent in these basic areas of living, but still depend on you for love, protection, guidance, and support. As your children reach adolescence and move toward adulthood, they become less reliant on you and gain greater independence in all aspects of their lives. This process of separation prepares your children for the demands of adulthood. But this progression toward adulthood is not inevitable and is often stymied by well-intentioned, but misguided, parents.

Contingent Children

Contingent children are dependent on others for how they feel about themselves. Some parents want to foster this dependence. These parents act on their own needs for power and use control and coercion to ensure that they remain the dominant forces in their children's lives. Contingent children can be recognized in the following ways:

- Depend on others to provide them with incentive to achieve.
- Depend on others for their happiness because they have no ownership of their lives and little responsibility for their own thoughts, emotions, and actions.
- Reinforced with inappropriate rewards and no limits, and regardless of their behavior.
- Poor decision makers because their parents hold the belief that they always know what is best and make decisions without soliciting their children's wishes.

Independent Children

Independent children differ from contingent children in several essential ways. If your children are independent, you have provided them with the belief that they are competent and capable of taking care of themselves. You offered them the guidance to find activities that are meaningful and satisfying. You gave your children the freedom to experience life fully and learn its many important lessons. Independent children can be recognized in the following ways:

- Intrinsically motivated because they are allowed to find their own reasons to achieve.
- Were given the opportunity and guidance to explore achievement activities of their own choosing.
- Parents use extrinsic rewards appropriately and sparingly.
- Collaborative rather than a controlled relationship with their parents in which the children's ideas and wishes are solicited and considered.
- Good decision makers because they were allowed to consider various options and, with the support and guidance of their parents, make their own decisions.

Parent and Children Responsibilities

At the heart of whether you will be raising a contingent or independent children is that you understand the essential responsibilities that you and they need to accept. Taylor's Law of Family Responsibilities states that if family members fulfill their own responsibilities and do not assume others', then children develop into independent people and everyone is happy.

Your Responsibilities

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Your responsibilities revolve primarily around providing your children with the opportunity, means, and support to pursue their goals. The psychological means include providing love, guidance, and encouragement in their efforts. The practical means include ensuring that your children have the materials needed, proper instruction, and transportation, among other logistical concerns.

Your Children's Responsibilities

Your child's responsibilities involve doing what is necessary to maximize the opportunities that you give them. These responsibilities include giving their best effort, being responsible and disciplined, staying committed, and giving an achievement opportunity a realistic try, as well as, completing all tasks and exercises, getting the most out of instruction, being cooperative, and expressing appreciation and gratitude for others' efforts.

Types of Contingent Children

I have identified five types of contingent children. All of the them are created in similar ways. Children develop a particular contingent style depending on their temperament and that of their parents.

Pleasers

Pleasers will do everything they can to get the love and attention they crave. Pleasers may often be perceived as model children who are successful and exceptionally giving to others. Yet, in pleasing others, they often neglect their own needs and, as a result, are unfulfilled, resentful, and unhappy.

Disappointers

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Disappointers are nonachievers who never live up to expectations. They are usually bright and demonstrate promise in a number of areas, for example, they often score

highly on IQ and achievement tests, yet they rarely accomplish anything. Disappointers relieve the pressure they feel from their parents by simply not trying. Disappointers avoid their parents' expectations by sabotaging themselves, for example, with lack of effort or avoidance of the achievement activity, or significant problem behavior such as drug use or criminal misconduct.

Reactors

Reactors do the exact opposite of whatever their parents want them to do. Parents often interpret this behavior as independence, but in actuality, Reactors are highly dependent on their parents, in a paradoxical way. Reactors feel controlled by their parents and feel powerless to directly assert themselves against their constraints. Reactors wait to see what their parents want them to do and then they choose the course that is in direct opposition to it. This reactive behavior usually emerges in the form of nonconformist dress, poor grades, "unacceptable" peer relations, and, possibly, alcohol and drug use.

Frustrators

Frustrators, not surprisingly, cause tremendous frustration in their parents. Frustrators are not "bad kids" and they rarely get into trouble. They do fairly well in school and in other achievement settings, yet are often viewed as underachievers who don't perform up to their ability. For example, a Frustrator might get a B+ rather than putting in a little extra effort to get an A in a class, or be named as an alternate to perform in a musical recital, or lose a tightly contested sports competition.

Rejecters

Rejecters refuse their parents' expectations, choosing a course of his own in spite of their parents' objections. Rejecters do not simply react by choosing the opposite, but rather thoroughly discard whatever their parents have to offer. Rejecters may be viewed as the most healthy and adaptive of the five kinds of contingent children because they have separated from their parents and become autonomous and self-directed people. But Rejecters pay a price for their extreme disengagement by damaging their

relationships with their parents and discarding even the positive contributions their parents made.

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Raise Independent Children

Independence is not something that your children can gain on their own. They have neither the perspective, experience, nor skills to develop independence separately from you. Rather, it is a gift you give your children that they will cherish and benefit from their entire lives. You can provide your child with several essential ingredients for gaining independence:

- Give your children love and respect.
- Show confidence in your children's capabilities.
- Teach them that they have control over their lives.
- Provide guidance and then give them the freedom to make their own decisions.

Teach Responsibility

One of your tasks as the parent is to teach your children about responsibility. The best way to ensure that you and your children assume the appropriate responsibilities is for each of you to know what your responsibilities are.

If you and your children have a clear understanding of what is expected of each of you, then it will be easier to stay within the confines of those responsibilities.

Make a list of what you as a parent will be doing to help your children succeed.

Then, make a list with your children of what their responsibilities should be. Next, identify other individuals who will have responsibilities (and what they are) in your children's achievement activities, such as teachers, instructors, or coaches.

There should also be consequences for not fulfilling responsibilities. The best consequences are those that remove something of importance to your children and give

them the control to get it back by acting appropriately. This process provides absolute clarity to both you and your children about what your "jobs" are. It also allows for no confusion at a later point when either of you step over the line and assume the other's responsibilities or neglects their own.

Demand Accountability

Many parts of our culture send a message to children that nothing is their fault. Whether rationalizing bad behavior, looking for scapegoats on which to blame misfortune, or faulting others for their failures, children are constantly told that they do not need to be responsible for their actions. Yet, the ability of children to hold themselves accountable for their actions is a critical part of becoming independent.

The reluctance of children to take responsibility for their actions is based on their desire to protect themselves from failure. By blaming outside factors, such as other people, bad luck, or unfairness, children can safeguard their egos from harm. Yet, responsibility is to sides of the same coin. Your children can't take responsibility for their achievements and successes unless they are will to take responsibility for their mistakes and failures.

Encourage Exploration

Early in your children's lives, you need to keep them on a fairly short "leash" to ensure their safety. This care builds your child's sense of security by teaching them that they have a safe place to return to if they venture too far and that you are there to protect them when needed.

There is, however, a fine line between security and dependence. When your children have established their sense of security, you must then encourage them to explore the world beyond the safety net that you provide. This "push out of the nest" allows your children to test their own capabilities in the "real world" and to find a sense of competence, security, and independence within themselves.