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## Are You Raising Self-Sufficient Kids?

**If you're doing for your children what they can reasonably do for themselves, you'll want to read this.**

By JEANNE MUCHNICK  
INTOWN WESTCHESTER MAGAZINE

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**a** A college freshman called her mom numerous times in one day to get instructions because she had no idea how to do her laundry.

**b** A 4th-grade teacher no longer gives book reports as homework (she has students write them in class instead) because she found too many parents were doing the kids' assignments.

**c** A 13-year-old sat in a restaurant booth and played with her cell phone while her mother made her a plate from the buffet line.

**d** All of the above

The correct answer is D. Surprised? I have to confess that, to a degree, I was. I knew before I began my research that parents in this area dote on their children—I live here, after all—but what surprised me was how much, especially once they reach the middle- and high-school years. Each of these situations was relayed to me by Westchester residents and therapists who say today's parents coddle their children excessively, raising the question: Are we rearing self-sufficient kids, or are we giving them a "free pass" to stay dependent longer than is healthy and necessary?

Teaching children to be self-sufficient and instilling in them a sense of personal responsibility are two of the most difficult challenges of parenting. What's happening too often, explains Harris Stratyner, PhD, a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Yonkers, is that our kids have no idea how to self-manage. In some extreme cases, completely normal, competent children are reluctant to do for themselves things that are age-appropriate, such as sleeping alone, solving problems with their friends, and the big one: doing their homework without parental aid.

And if parents don't nip the impulse to do too much in the bud, it only gets worse. According to Mindy Bingham, co-author of *Career Choices*, 20 percent of 26-year-olds live at home or are not economically independent of their parents. She calls them KIPPERS (Kids in Parents' Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings) and says parents are not being proactive enough in helping raise their kids for a life of self-sufficiency. Granted, starting salaries for college grads can be low and housing costs in our area are high, but students need to learn responsibility, which means paying rent and contributing in some way to the household, which many kids today just don't do. "They're spoiled," she says.



### Instilling Independence

**Age 3** Encourage your child to do things for herself. Even at age 4, she can pick out her own clothes, put dirty clothes in the hamper, and help set the table.

**Ages 5–6** Assign chores. Taking ownership of a job helps the whole family and teaches kids how to be part of a team.

**Age 6** Teach the value of money. Make going to the supermarket a fun excursion by giving him coupons and having him help you find those products in the store, comparing prices of similar brands, and talking about the differences.

**Ages 7–9** Introduce your child to basic money management. Show her what a monthly bill looks like; if she's good at subtraction and addition, have her help you balance your checkbook.

**All ages** Praise your child for being resourceful. Rather than telling your child how to handle a situation, let him work through it on his own, and tell him how proud you are when he solves problems, such as finding a ride home after school or sharing a lunch when he forgets his.

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It's not just a Westchester issue, of course, but one that exists nationwide. Experts blame the fact that we've become a society of entitlement, where any problem is always someone else's fault and children are praised regardless of the caliber of their work. Our fast-paced, two-career-couple world only adds to the situation, as parents are often so bogged down with the day-to-day challenges of work and parenting that they find it easier to say "yes" rather than "no." The fact that we live in an affluent community doesn't help either, with many parents simply hiring help, like a tutor, an educational consultant, or a coach to give their child a competitive edge. Still others say that caring parents (moms especially) are trying to provide the best for their children, but lose sight of what they're trying to achieve—to raise well-balanced, responsible adults—and go way overboard in the "helping out" department.

"It's definitely something parents struggle with on a daily basis," says Meg Sussman, PhD, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Mount Kisco. Indeed, if you're anything like me, your day often consists of being short-order cook, chauffeur, personal shopper, secretary, public-relations handler, and coach—often all at the same time!

"Parents have somehow gotten the message that we need to do everything for our kids," explains Paul Donahue, PhD, director of Child Development Associates in Scarsdale and author of *Parenting Without Fear: Letting Go of Worry and Focusing on What Really Matters*. "And though much of it is well intentioned, the truth is we can do more for our children by doing less."

Indeed, if you ask parents if their goal is to raise self-sufficient children, their answer is "yes," but experts say there's a disconnect in putting that goal into action. And of course, the irony is that by constantly serving our children, we end up raising young adults who are incapable of serving themselves.

### **Responsibility 101**

Before offering tips and advice from both sides of the fence, let me come clean and claim "guilty as charged"—at least on some level. Yes, I want my 12- and 14-year-old daughters to be able to solve problems in effective and positive ways, yet I do tend to jump (often literally!) when they need something—be it a ride home in the rain, their favorite sub sandwich because there's "nothing in the house," even a glass of water when they are sitting closer to the fridge. Lori P.\* of Harrison, a mom whose girls are the same age as mine, makes me feel better (less embarrassed?) by saying she, too, is guilty of indulging her kids every now and then. "I know I should be making them do more things on their own, but sometimes it's just easier to do it yourself," she says.

Indeed, parenting takes patience—and time—which many of us busy multitasking moms don't have. "If getting something done quickly is your priority, you're going to end up doing it for them," says Rachel K.,\* a mom of two from Irvington, who admits it's hard to find the right balance between letting kids learn on their own and running interference for every little situation that comes up. She says she had a lot of expectations thrust on her as a child because that's the way her own parents had been raised, so she doesn't mind indulging her kids a bit more.

Stacey K.,\* a Hastings mom of three, tends to take a harder line, saying she's "shocked at how many children have no clue how to do simple things like laundry, grocery shop, or heat up simple meals. Many don't even know where the hamper is." Stacey says that her kids, ages 8, 10, and 13, change their sheets, help with food shopping, make their beds, and are learning how to budget with their allowances—but most of their friends think she's too strict. "Hardly any of the parents require their children to do similar chores," she says. "I've had situations where my kids clear their plates from the kitchen table while their friends sit there waiting for someone else to do it for them."

In her opinion—and many experts would agree—a lot of how you parent depends on how you were raised. Either you want to parent the same way or do something completely different. Stacey says she grew up with a lot of responsibility, including making meals at age 10, and so is trying to impart the same expectations on her children. I, on the other hand, grew up a tad on the spoiled side, meaning if I didn't make my bed, my mom eventually did. Of course that's all coming back to haunt me now as my 14-year-old's room is 10 times worse than mine ever was. My parents also didn't expect me to do

chores until I was about 16—and most of them involved driving my little sister around. Now, as a mom myself, I know it's better to toe a more rigid line and set the bar higher. For example, ever since my daughters were 7 and 10, they've been required to walk our dog every day—no exceptions.

So, how do you know what's reasonable to expect from your child from age to age? A good rule of thumb, says Dr. Stratyner, is to ask whether you're doing things for your children that they reasonably could do for themselves. Sound difficult? Not if you start when they're young. "A 3- or 4-year-old can put clothes in the hamper, set the table, or learn how to put plates in the dishwasher," he says. Even if you're cooking, you can involve your child in some aspect of preparation such as washing off vegetables or retrieving things from the pantry. Getting kids to participate in daily chores teaches them they're a valued member of the family and that their job—no matter how small—is important. When they know that Mom is depending on them, they feel good about themselves, which only helps to grow their self-esteem, adds Dr. Donahue. He's adamant that the groundwork must be set early for the best results. "You want your child to start 'owning up' to her responsibilities," he says.

Here's where the coddling tends to become an issue. And I'm the perfect case in point. Though I started a chore chart back when my girls were preschoolers and did the whole gold-sticker thing when someone emptied the dishwasher or threw her clothes in the hamper, I got too busy and distracted to keep up this kind of positive reinforcement. Eventually the chores—and the chart—fell by the wayside, and though I tried to remind my girls about what I expected, we never got the same momentum back.

After learning from my own mistakes, I advised my sister, who has a 5- and 7-year-old, to start early and stay consistent. And she has. Today her girls are models of age-appropriate self-reliance: straightening up their rooms, sweeping the kitchen floor, loading the dishwasher, and even helping with cooking.

The fact is: Kids can surprise you. Leslie Cowen, a Mamaroneck mom of two, says she's tried to live by the creed "give them ownership" and though, as a new mom she was nervous about letting her children try and fail, she realized that by denying them the opportunity to do things on their own, she was also denying them the opportunity to succeed on their own. And so, over the years, she's tried to make it a priority to get her kids to make their beds, pitch in with the yard work, and have her son help his sister with her homework. And while she admits her kids haven't always been perfect at getting their jobs done without some gentle nudging, the effort has paid off. Her children are now 16 and 19 and she's convinced they are more self-reliant teens as a result.

### **Conversation Starter**

It's important to keep in mind that raising self-sufficient kids isn't just about chores, stresses Bingham. "Telling parents they just need to get their kids to make their beds or set the table is a snooze," she says. "What they really need to do is start talking to their kids about becoming career focused and committed." She also strongly suggests conveying your expectations at an early age. Let them know what you expect on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis, and let them know the consequences of not completing chores. So if your daughter doesn't water the plants on Saturday, she'll miss a get-together with her friends, which, says experts, goes a lot further than nagging and tends to break that dependency cycle. And that includes doing homework.

It may sound cold, but your job as a parent is to help prepare your child for a life of her own, says Bingham. It doesn't mean you have to rush your youngster to flee the nest, but rather it means gradually teaching your child what it means to stand on her own—socially, emotionally, and financially. She strongly urges parents to start the conversation—at grade-school-age and in an excited way—about how they'll eventually be moving out of the house and have their own lives and careers. Talk about the thrill of renting your first apartment, buying your first car, and so on. Even if she's too young to understand the mechanics of these adult tasks, the conversation will reinforce the concept of responsibility.

“Even at a young age, you need to foster the idea of independence,” adds Dr. Sussman, herself the mom of two. This includes allowing kids to struggle with homework instead of just turning it over to you when it gets too hard, letting them deal with issues with their teachers, and letting them work out problems with their friends rather than always rushing in to call the mom or the school. Of course all of this has to be age appropriate and depends on what you know, deep down, your child can handle.

Needless to say, the biggest challenge is allowing (and watching!) kids deal with issues on their own. After all, no one wants to see her children hurt or struggling. But too often, says Dr. Stratyner, parents snatch away valuable learning experiences by jumping in on their kids’ behalf rather than letting them make choices for themselves. “Too often, we give our kids soft landings when we really should let them fall a little harder,” says Dr. Stratyner. He advises “being there,” but “being there” with a caveat. What parents should continuously ask themselves is: What can I do now to help my child take another step toward self-sufficiency?

It’s something I’m still working on with my girls (I have my nieces to hold up as models, after all), but luckily, I feel I’m on the right track. At age 9 I dropped them in town (with cell phones) and gave them their own budgets to work with (often with a Starbucks card) so they could keep track of their own money. And though I’m still a short-order cook and personal shopper, I’ve cut down on my taxi-driving and now make them walk. After all, I walked to school in the snow, sleet, and rain—why shouldn’t they? At the very least, it gives them some “When I was your age...” stories to tell their children.

\*Names have been changed

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