

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My son is 12, and I am torn by conflicting feelings of wanting to “mother” him and wanting to help him stand on his own two feet. Help!

ANSWER: These feelings probably have more to do with your issues than your son's. Unfortunately, he will have to bear the consequences of your choices in this area. Often (not always) fathers are better at seeing the long-term value of independence. They are often more capable of using the firm side of love. (Hint: Consult your husband. Let your “plan” for independence be the product of both your hearts and minds.)

Different children have different needs for and levels of independence. Some children come out of the womb wanting the keys to the family car; others will be living with their parents at 40. Some children are terrified by independence (some parents are too); others are inspired by it. Independence is a function of a number of factors:

- (1) **Temperament.** Children are born with varying levels of independence. Don't assume all your children will handle independence in the same way or time frame.
- (2) **The relational style of their parents.** Some parents foster dependence because of their own needy egos or naiveté in parenting. Some parents foster independence because their children hamper their life-style. Some parents do a wonderful job of guiding and enticing their children toward age-appropriate and healthy independence.
- (3) **Life experience.** Some children have experienced so much inconsistency, change, loss, fear and heartache that they lack the courage and hope they need to become independent. Some children experience so much consistency, support, encouragement and example that they easily have the courage and hope they need to become independent.
- (4) **Trust relationship with God.** Some children fear God is neither good enough nor strong enough to stay at their side as they travel the road of independence. Some children are convinced God is both good enough and strong enough to stay at their side as they travel the road of independence (MK 10:27). Children experience most of their trust relationship with God as they experience the trust relationship that their parents have with God.

I can give general parameters, but it is important that you know how each of these factors affects **your** child.

Whenever we deal with our children, it is critical that we determine what is the BEST way, in a particular circumstance, to love each individual child well. **Fostering unhealthy dependence is not loving the child well;** such immobilizing dependence will produce an adult-child unable to handle life. Conversely, **pushing a child into independence too quickly is not loving the**

child well; such forced independence will produce an emotionally and relationally detached adult-child unable to handle life. Both paths will eventually leave the adult-child hurt and angry. Again, the path a parent chooses often has far more to do with the **parent's** needs and wants than the needs of the child.

What is a parent's job in fostering age-appropriate and healthy independence?

1. **Know your child well** in the above four areas.
2. **Find and/or create age-appropriate opportunities** for your child to experience independence. Stay alert for teachable moments. Talk to other parents and read some parenting books for ideas.
3. **Monitor** how your child is doing. Carefully determine when your child needs to be rescued and when you should let the natural consequences of life have their effects. Generally, the parent should seek to use life consequences early in the life of a child when the consequences are less severe. Hopefully, when the child is required to make big choices by himself later in life, he will more likely choose well. Keep open lines of communication with teachers, coaches, youth workers etc.
4. **Positively reinforce** the moves your child makes toward independence through verbal praise, meaningful touch, and expressions of confidence in him for the future. Verbally and passionately paint a picture for him of his eventual full independence. Talk openly and often about her choices.
5. As the child gets older, parents should **remove more and more of the financial, academic, and decision-making support** which they provide for their child in keeping with each individual child's abilities and progress.
6. **Repeat this process** for the life of the child.
7. **Stay alert to and repent of** your own selfish needs...either to keep the child dependent on you (so that you feel needed, fulfilled or successful as a parent), or to push her into premature independence (so you don't have the bother, responsibility, or time commitment which interfere with your agenda).

The only dependence parents should foster is dependence on God. This is best done by example.

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