

Empowering vs Enabling – The Fine Line of Parenting

We live in a competitive world and most parents would jump at the chance to give their child every advantage imaginable. The world can also be unkind and, as parents, we feel a need to protect our children from everything possible. And yes, parents are supposed to help and protect their children but when does supporting children turn into overhelping? The difference between the two is a very fine line and is often very difficult to decipher.

Responsible parenting means providing food, clothing, and shelter, giving attention and love, and protecting our children from danger. It does not mean doing everything for them and protecting them from anything that may bring them grief. This type of parenting is excessive and can develop due to a parent's fear, anxiety, or peer pressure from other parents. It can also be a way that parents overcompensate for the difficult childhood they experienced. Whatever the case, although the hyper-involvement comes from a place of love, it can actually hinder a child's ability to achieve autonomy.

In child development terms, autonomy develops when children can function independently and have choices. Without this, they may experience what psychologist Erik Erikson called "shame and doubt." This leads to decreased confidence and increased anxiety. And when parents make all the decisions and fix all the problems for their children, those children have underdeveloped coping and life skills. The goal should not be to raise dependent children but, instead, to raise resilient and confident ones.

In order for this to happen, parents must empower their children by teaching self-reliance. The goal is to raise children who are independent and stable on their own. For this to happen children must be allowed to make mistakes and learn to be resourceful in finding solutions to problems that present themselves. Parents can do this by supporting their children without completely removing themselves from the process. It is important for parents to be there for their children as a sounding board. This will help them develop healthy coping strategies and feel more confident in their decision making.

One way to do this is by letting children make mistakes in a safe environment. In the Hiscoe program, instructors utilize the classroom as a way to foster autonomy while teaching the skill of the day. By using Teaching SKILLZ such as "choices" and "intrinsic motivation," instructors are providing opportunities for children to make their own decisions so they feel confident. And when a mistake is made, instructors use "re-direction" to get them back on track and try again.

The line between empowering and enabling is a very fine one. But as career and life coach Maura Koutoujian put it, "When a child is enabled, they miss out on the opportunity to cultivate intrinsic motivation - a critical component in developing accountability and self-confidence." Although it's hard for parents to see their children struggle, hurt and disappointment are a part of life and children need to develop ways to overcome those things on their own. Supportive parenting should always move children closer to independence and stability which will lead to resilient adults in the future.