



How to Facilitate Your Teen's Independent Learning



What is independent learning and why is it important?

Independent learning is education taken on outside of the classroom, and directed by the learner's curiosity. It can be a great way to engage a bright teen who struggles in traditional academic environments, or an enterprising A+ student who wants to stand out from his or her peers.

Independent learning can look unfamiliar; goals replace assignments, projects replace classwork, and the internet amongst other tools replaces traditional textbooks. Examples of independent learning projects are:

- Starting a Business
- Starting a Book Club
- Giving a Talk
- Writing a Blog
- Interning
- Building a Computer Program
- Creating Art
- Creating a Youtube Series
- Volunteering



Why?

Independent learning gives teens ownership of their education. Using their specific interests and curiosities as a foundation and starting point, teens are intrinsically motivated to learn - one of the best feelings there is.

Independent learning focuses on the process as well as the goal. Your teen will not be given a road map similar to those found in schools, but instead they will have to rely on themselves to be resourceful and find their way forward. Along the way they will pick up real life skills like organization, time-management, and budgeting.

Students in self-regulated independent learning environments are shown to have improved academic performance, increased motivation and confidence, and greater awareness of their limitations and their ability to manage them. ¹

¹ Meyers, Haywood, Sachdev, and Faraday, 2008. What is Independent Learning and What are the Benefits for Students?





Give Them Autonomy

The greatest sign of success for a teacher... is to be able to say, 'The children are now working as if I did not exist.'

”

[Maria Montessori](#)

WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?

Autonomous learners are able to study on their own. They can learn and apply skills in self-directed learning. They can release potential that has been suppressed by institutional education. They can exercise responsibility for learning and be held accountable for learning outcomes. They can determine the direction of their own learning. The autonomous learner is empowered. At first glance, the autonomous learner may seem totally self-sufficient. While it is true that the autonomous learner may teach herself a great deal, the parent-as-teacher makes the learner's autonomy possible. Your learner, your child, needs you immensely.



In the context of education, research has described seven characteristics of autonomous learners.

Autonomous Learners.....

- 1 **Make insights** into their learning styles and strategies
- 2 **Actively approach** the learning task at hand
- 3 **Use the scientific method** to revise and reject ideas
- 4 **Take risks**
- 5 **Make good guesses**
- 6 **Place importance on form** as well as content
- 7 **Have a tolerant and outgoing approach** to the learning task

² Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, A. 1998. Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy. Great Britain: Prentice Hall. 41-42.



Facilitate

How Do I Facilitate Autonomy?

Remember that learner autonomy is a process rather than a product. Your child can never be a finished product, nor should they be. Your child can, however, become an independent, lifelong learner. By promoting your child's learning autonomy, you are not teaching your child what to learn, but how to learn. You want to create a process through which your child can adapt to any learning situation, including failure. Mistakes are part of the learning process.

Let your child take the wheel and drive.

We know what you're thinking – If my child is driving their own education, how do I participate?

Ask don't tell.

Use questioning strategies to help your teen research, problem solve, make decisions and come to conclusions on their own.

It's always important to remember that it takes steps to reach any goal. You can help your teen get there by continuing to ask "how" and "what" instead of offering solutions.

Here's an example:

Teen:
I want to learn Spanish.

Teen:
I should probably go grab a grammar book from the library.

Teen:
I should probably watch some Spanish television programs and try to find a language exchange group in town.

Teen:
Maybe next summer I can do a volunteer program in Spain and immerse myself in the language!

Parent:
Great, how do you want to do that?

Parent:
I can drive you there. What else do you think you need to do to learn Spanish?

Parent:
I can help you look for shows if you want and drive you to any language exchange group you find that's appropriate. Anything else you think you can do to learn faster?

Parent:
Sounds fun, I can help you look into affordable options, but we might want to check out alternatives that are closer to home.

To better facilitate your teen's learning, it's also important to:

Take all of your teen's questions seriously.

This is a must to demonstrate that you are supportive of your teen's independent learning. Do your best to answer every question – no matter how ludicrous it might sound. If you have no idea how to answer, try to send them in a direction where they might uncover the answer.

Invite your teen to events.

Heading to the theatre or to a professional development workshop? Ask your teen if they want to come with. This might help you discover new topics your teen is interested in pursuing.

Point things out, but don't hand them over.

No one knows your child better than you do, so when you discover something – a book, an article, a workshop – that they might enjoy, point it out. That said, do not force it upon them.

Recognize that every situation presents a learning opportunity.

It's important to leave time for your teen to relax, but recognize that every experience can be a lead to a discovery. Even watching television at home in your living can be a learning experience if you ask the right questions.



Habits of Learning and Thinking

Helping your teen to develop habits of learning and thinking is another way you can help to develop their independent learning.

Journaling

Keeping a learning journal will help your teen to monitor their learning as it is happening in the present. Encourage your teen to chronicle their learning at least once a week, answering questions like:

- What did I learn this week?
- Where did I struggle?
- What were my breakthroughs?

Through writing about their process your teen will be better equipped to notice patterns, identify problems when they arise, and repeat successes. The act of writing forces perspective and will help your teen to notice lessons that they might have otherwise missed and be iterative in their process as they learn.



Goal Setting

Goal setting will orient your teen in the future. Through setting goals your teen will consider what end result he or she wants from the independent learning - what they want to make, what they want to do, and define what success means for them. Goals should always follow the SMART framework meaning that they are Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Once your teen has decided what he or she wants, they will begin to peek into the future to calculate how their actions may or may not lead to their desired state.

Reflection

Reflecting will allow your teen to learn from the past. As John Dewey said "We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience." At important milestones, both positive and negative, looking back and reflecting will help your teen to understand how their actions lead them to where they are, and to learn from those experiences. The most important lesson to learn from reflection, is that both successes and failures come from the strategies taken, and the work put in, not the potential of the learner.



Closing Remarks

I am so excited by all the amazing possibilities our kids have today. Can you believe all the opportunities out there now that didn't even exist when we were exploring our post-high school options?

And yet all of these possibilities force our teens into a situation where they must make extremely difficult decisions early on in their lives – What can I afford to do? What really matters? How do you create a meaningful life?

Helping your teen get ready to fly the nest can also unveil many of your own fears such as *did I prepare them to make the best choice possible?* You might lie awake at night thinking, What if I get it wrong? What if I let them make the “wrong” decision?

The truth is you can help your kids find their place in the world. You can help them learn how to make sure they get the most of their experiences. And you can do that while supporting, celebrating and strengthening your relationship with them as they explore and define their own goals and dreams.

I know it can be done. I know from my experience parenting my son Dale who is now a Penguin published author and a business owner making a name for himself in downtown San Francisco. I've also witnessed and taken advice from friends and families ahead of me on the parenting path who had great relationships with their kids who were happy, healthy and independent.

How do you do it?

You focus on the long game. You give them the freedom to learn and make their own mistakes. You support, guide them, and help them develop systems, habits, and skills that will assist them in creating a healthy, meaningful life no matter what field, career, or type of education they pursue.

You can do it. I know you can.

Sincerely,
Lisa Nalbone