

Understanding the parent's perspective

Independence or Interdependence?

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

When I was a new teacher faced with the job of educating parents, I had great enthusiasm for sharing all that I knew. My energy was boundless, matched only by my zeal.

I will never forget trying to explain the concept of self-esteem to a newly arrived Mexican immigrant mother. She kept insisting that there was no such thing in Spanish. I didn't give up. I kept trying to explain it to her. She sat there the whole time with a blank look on her face. She wasn't getting it. Finally she said in complete bewilderment, "You can't esteem yourself, you can only esteem others."

I've been thinking about that exchange for 25 years. She didn't get what I was saying, but I didn't get what she was saying either.

Finally I'm starting to get it.

Newborn babies are faced with the two major tasks of childhood:

- to become independent individuals; and
- to establish connections with others.

The parents' job is to help their children with these tasks. Most parents focus more on one task than the other. Some even ignore the other task and leave its accomplishment to chance.

The choice of focus is cultural, and the outcome is that the child comes to define "self" as his culture defines the concept. Two such definitions are:

- The self is a separate, autonomous individual whose job it is to grow

and develop into the best he or she can be in order to become part of a larger group.

- The self is inherently connected, not separate, and is defined in terms of relationships. Obligation to others is more important than personal fulfillment or achievement.

The choice of which task to focus on and the definition of "self" influence everything a parent does. For example, parents who place a larger value on independence than making connections are likely to encourage early self-help skills. They hand their babies the spoon when they first reach for it. They teach their babies to sleep alone in a crib. Self-reliance is the goal of parents who focus on independence. Self-assertion is another goal, self-expression, too. The end result of reaching all these goals set by independence-minded parents is self-esteem. These children fit right into the early childhood programs where the teacher has the same goals.

Independence-focused parents may also teach skills that connect their children to others, but they usually put far less emphasis on them.

Parents who are more concerned about their children's ability to create and maintain connections have a different view of practically everything. Sometimes they don't fit so well into our programs because of their heavy focus on *interdependence* or mutual dependence instead of independence.

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They may have little concern about self-help skills. For example, self-feeding may be postponed because feeding is a time that connections are nourished. They may continue spoon feeding way past infancy into toddlerhood and beyond. This practice can get them in trouble when their child enters child care. Teachers may be shocked when a three year old sits down at breakfast the first day and waits to be fed. If the teacher resists, the parents can be quite upset.

Imagine how it would feel to send children off into somebody else's care thinking that they will be fed and finding out that they won't. Parents can be quite surprised and disappointed when they learn of a program's policy on self-help skills.

Although parents who stress independence look down on the idea of "coddling" children, to the parent focused on making connections, there's nothing negative about doing things for children. These parents see no reason to keep from prolonging babyhood and continuing the closeness. Their attitude makes sense if you understand their goal. They worry about too much independence, so they try to discourage it.

Independent-minded parents have the opposite worry. They fear if they don't encourage independence their children will remain dependent on them, maybe forever!

So when adults with these opposite concerns meet up with each other in early childhood programs, there are bound to be clashes. The one focuses on creating and maintaining relationships, the other on creating an independent individual. They each behave according to their beliefs.

If you are an independent-minded person, as most of us early childhood education professionals are, you may be shocked to see a parent discouraging a child who tries to do things for herself.

I understood this parental behavior better when I talked to Joe Tobin of *Preschool in Three Cultures* fame. He told me about the lesson some Japanese parents give their babies when they first start to assert themselves. Instead of encouraging independence, they teach the baby that it's good to let others help you. They even have a special word for "graciously accepting help." The reason goes something like this: Letting others help, even when it's not needed, strengthens the relationship and makes the "helper" happy.

Parents who focus on relationships are less adamant about babies learning to sleep through the night alone. They are less anxious to promote self-expression, self-help, *even self-esteem*. Anything that has "self" connected to it is suspicious. They don't want to raise *self-ish* children, they want to raise children who put others first.

Thinking in terms of interdependence is a completely different way of looking at getting needs met. The parent who is an independence advocate teaches that it is each child's job to increasingly take care of his or her own needs as capabilities develop. But children who grow up in an "other-centered" family learn that increasingly the family members' needs should be their focus, not their own needs. They still get their needs met, because while they are taking care of others, others are taking care of them. Needs are met in both types of homes, but the process in each is very different.

An example from my own life illustrates how clashes can occur when

adults who are independence-minded meet up with adults who are "other-centered." I have had a hard time watching parents dress kids who are plenty old enough to dress themselves. "There's no excuse for a four year old to be so helpless," I've said to myself watching a child standing passively while her parent put her coat on her. If I had said it out loud, I might have gotten the answer, "She'll learn to eventually dress herself, why hurry it?"

Sometimes the shoe was on the other foot and I was the one being criticized. For example, when my child shyly refused to properly greet his preschool teacher or even his grandfather, I excused the behavior. I haven't been openly criticized, but I have seen the looks on the faces of some people who saw this. I imagine they were saying to themselves, "There's no excuse for a four year old being so disrespectful to elders." I'm sure that they saw my lack of attention to teaching my son proper greetings as a moral failure. For me, greetings are merely a social convention and of no real importance. "He'll learn eventually," I'd have said in response to the criticism.

Of course, in time the first child learned to put on her own coat just as my son learned to properly greet people. That's the point. Most children, no matter how they were raised, do grow up to become BOTH independent individuals AND people who create and maintain relationships. Children accomplish both these major tasks even if their parents only focused on one.

Parents expect their children to be both independent and connected, but they work harder on what they believe to be most important. They leave to chance what they are less concerned about — or they work on it hit or miss. Most parents never make a conscious decision about what to focus on because it comes from a deeply imbedded cultural value.

It isn't until misunderstandings arise that these values begin to show. And, even then, it may take a long time to "get it." It has been years since I've seen Teresa, the mother to whom I tried to explain self-esteem, but I'm willing to bet that she began to understand my point of view long before I ever understood hers.

Reference

Tobin, Joseph J. *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.