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INTRODUCTION

Parenting can be an enjoyable, rewarding, and special experience, yet often is filled with times of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety. When your child is a baby or toddler, you may ask in desperation, *When will she finally go to sleep?* When your child is in elementary school (or maybe even in middle and high school), you may wonder, *How much help should I offer him with his report?* When your child becomes a teen, you may think, *Should I encourage her to go for that summer job? Can I trust her to get herself to work on time when I'm not available to wake her up?* The questions never seem to end, even when your child launches into higher education, career, and even becomes a parent him- or herself.

Every day, every stage of your child's or teen's development brings unique challenges and, hopefully, wonderful times. In a variety of situations, many of us ask the same basic question over and over: *When do I step in, and when do I watch it play out?* It's a question, essentially, about independence. How much independence can your child handle? How much should you support and guide your child versus doing things for her or him?

Children and teens of all ages can learn skills that help them to be independent. This book is for expectant parents, foster and adoptive parents, parents of infants and toddlers, and parents of

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children in kindergarten through high school. The skills described in this book are meant to be adaptable to your child's age and unique personality and abilities. Although independence and autonomy are values in some ways entangled with culture, we believe that there are many ways to teach these skills that fit one's cultural values and beliefs. Children and teens from all cultures can benefit from learning the abilities that can lead to becoming a healthy, competent adult.

For young children, independence might look like picking up food with fingers or a fork to feed him- or herself, or it might look like putting away one toy before getting out a new one. For school-age kids, independence may mean starting homework at a consistent time without prompting. Or it could mean that your 11-year-old with diabetes speaks up for herself at school when she feels that her blood sugar is out of whack. Independence for a teen can look like "doing the right thing" when at a friend's house where drugs are available. Or it might involve your teen asking advice from you or from a teacher, neighbor, or other non-parent adult about topics for which the adult has a certain amount of expertise. For instance, a teen might ask her swim coach for advice about what to eat before a big swim meet.

Independence doesn't mean children do everything for themselves. It means knowing when they can and should do things by themselves, and when to ask others for help. An important part of becoming an adult, after all, is knowing when to turn to experts and when to be self-reliant.

As professionals who have worked with parents and families for many decades, we know that many parents struggle to teach their children to become self-sufficient and independent. Some parents struggle a great deal, whereas others seem to more effortlessly find the right path for each of their children. We hope to ease your parenting journey as you read the tips and advice within the pages of this book.

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Through our clinical work, and informed by research in developmental psychology and psychiatry, we've refined some key strategies and techniques to help foster more independent children and grown-ups. We've learned from what children and teenagers have shared with us, and we wrote this book so you, the parent, can feel more comfortable raising confident kids who grow up to be independent adults.

As you read this book, you will get the opportunity to reflect on your parenting style as well as on the personality and abilities of your child. Each chapter begins with a survey about your approach to parenting. We invite you to revisit your responses after reading about each topic. The surveys pose "What would you do?" scenarios as you raise your children at different ages. If a scenario is about a child who is older than yours is currently, try to imagine how you might handle the situation in the future. For instance, if the scenario is about driving and your child has not reached driving age, this might be a great time to start to think about how you might parent later on. And we encourage you to think back on things you did or wish you had done better when your child was younger. If you're parenting a teen and worry that you missed teaching some of the early lessons of independence, there's no need to panic: Life offers many chances to try again. Remember, teenagers' bodies finish maturing before their brains do. There is still time to teach their brains new habits!

In Chapters 1 and 2 we define *independence* and offer some ways you can encourage autonomy during various developmental stages. We have found that as children grow from toddlers to adults, there are some key ingredients that help nurture independence. When children have true self-confidence, as opposed to bravado or low confidence, they may be more willing to take healthy and appropriate risks. Watching your child take risks may seem scary, but healthy risks are essential to growth. Children who are confident

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enough to take risks also, paradoxically, are frequently confident enough also to be able to accept guidance from trusted adults.

Chapter 3 is about teaching your child to organize responsibilities, prioritize and initiate tasks, and persevere as he or she works toward goals. These skills are part of a broader area of maturation and ability to handle assignments, work, and situations requiring executive functioning.

Many children make impulsive decisions based on their desires at a particular time. Does this describe your child? If so, you will learn some tips in Chapter 4 for supporting him as he makes thoughtful and productive decisions toward short-term as well as long-term goals.

Chapter 5 covers patience and frustration. We all feel frustrated at times. This does not necessarily differentiate a healthy and independent adult from one who struggles to make appropriate choices. However, the ability to handle frustration and be patient when needed is an important skill for success.

When children are capable of monitoring their own behavior and decisions, they are more prepared to be self-sufficient. See Chapter 6 for ways to foster this skill in your children.

Chapter 7 focuses on social competence and how to teach children and teenagers to understand and respond to social cues. We also talk about how their actions and reactions can affect their success with friends, teachers, acquaintances, and all those who they meet in society.

Our technologically sophisticated society has much to offer parents and children but is full of pitfalls and obstacles as well. Helping your child gain a healthy ability to navigate through the technology maze is essential. Chapter 8 explores this topic.

Finally, Chapter 9 discusses the special circumstances that some children may face (e.g., divorce, loss, shyness, learning disability, blended families) and how parents can use these experiences as learning opportunities to foster coping strategies and maturity.

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Throughout the book, we offer case examples to highlight points made in the chapters. Most of these examples are compilations from the hundreds of parents and children whom we have supported over the years. Other examples are based on real people (whose identities have been disguised), to illustrate how you can teach independence skills to children and teens of different ages. We hope you see yourself and your child, past, present, or future, reflected in the scenarios. We also hope you can use the examples as models and jumping-off places for asking and sharing advice in conversation with other parents. As mentioned before, there are many right ways and endless variations for teaching the skills in this book.

We refer most often in this book to "your child," singular, knowing that you, and our other readers, have varying numbers of children. If you have more than one child in your life, we imagine one might have to learn social cues, whereas another might need more help in another area. Since no two children are identical, parenting is always an interesting adventure! Our idea is to help you to teach the skills in a way that's tailored to each child's age, personality, and traits.