



Supporting Your Child's Development of Agency

In the last few years many people, both children and adults, have felt powerless over major things that are happening in our world. We don't know if there is anything we can do to stay on an even keel during such times. Furthermore, recent psychological studies show that an unprecedented number of people feel chronically overwhelmed. In large part, this is because we have put ourselves at the mercy of others, feeling compelled to say yes to every invitation or request – or to respond to every ping from our devices as if our life depended on it. These feelings reflect ways in which we have lost our “agency,” the ability to be self-advocates and to make wise decisions that are consistent with the life we want to live. But agency begins to develop early in childhood, and parents play a key role in helping children build this important quality. Dr. Marti Erickson, developmental psychologist and co-host of Mom Enough®, joined Belinda Jensen of KARE-TV on March 12, 2022, to talk about what agency is, why it's important, and how we can nurture it in our children at every age – hopefully strengthening our own agency at the same time.

I. Background: What is agency and why is it important?

Agency is the ability to make wise decisions and put those decisions into actions that are consistent with the life we want to live. And it is a sense of self-efficacy, the **belief** that you can affect an outcome, that you have some power over what happens.

Agency is essential for being a leader. And it also is essential for good emotional health and good relationships. If you have agency, you understand that you can manage your feelings and that what you say and do has an influence on the people and spaces around you. And you can bring up original ideas and initiate things rather than waiting for others to direct you or demand something of you.

When supporting agency in our children, we need to strike an appropriate balance between a child's right to have a voice in things that affect them AND parental authority. This balance changes gradually as children mature and learn good values and decision-making skills.

II. Four practical ways to promote your child's development of agency

1) Listen closely to what children say, both in words and nonverbal cues

Reflect back their feelings, showing that you are paying attention. Empathize!

2) Help children figure out what they can control within reasonable limits

For example, they can choose refreshments for a playdate, one healthy snack and one sweet treat. They can choose a movie for family movie-night, as long as it's within a certain rating category. They may choose to do homework first and play outside after, or vice versa if they believe that they are better at concentrating on homework after they've run off a little energy. This helps kids tune into what works best for them since kids differ in terms of when they work best.

3) Identify values children can use in making difficult decisions

For example, guiding values might include honoring prior commitments, being honest, respecting others' feelings, keeping a social schedule that allows adequate time for homework and a good night's sleep.

4) Ask, don't tell, children how they should proceed

Use open-ended questions to ask children what their options are? What the consequences might be if they do this instead of that? What are the benefits and problems associated with different options? If you ask these questions when children are young, they will learn to ask those questions of themselves when they face a difficult decision.

Marti Erickson, Ph.D.

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