

Illustration by  
Billy Nuñez, age 16

# GROWING INDEPENDENCE: TIPS FOR PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

## CHILDREN LOVE TO LEARN

- Open and honest communication will create a lifelong closeness with your child.
- Routines and responsibilities will let your child know what to expect. When a rule is broken, a natural consequence needs to follow.
- As you teach your child how to be independent, you also need to teach how to be safe.
- Learning how to be a good friend is an important skill you can teach your child.

**Y**our little one is starting to explore the world outside your home. This is exciting, but can be scary!

Children from 4 to 6 years old are:

- Beginning to develop their independence and form real friendships.
- Learning rules to more difficult games.
- Developing important life skills.

## SET LIMITS

When children do something against the rules, explain simply and in a few words:

- That what they did was wrong
- What will happen if the behavior continues

Consequences need to be logical, meaningful, and simple. For example:

- If your child rides a bike without a helmet, the bike is off limits for a day or two.
- When your child won't share a toy, that toy can't be used for the rest of the day.

## CREATE AND KEEP ROUTINES

Teach about rules by setting up daily routines. Children do best when they know what to expect.

- In the morning:
  - Use the bathroom
  - Get dressed
  - Have breakfast
- At bedtime:
  - Take a bath
  - Brush teeth
  - Read a story

## Schedule specific times for TV, video games, and use of the computer.

When you know what your child is watching, you can avoid violence and other unacceptable content.

Limit "total screen time" to no more than 2 hours a day.

## Read at bedtime.

This helps your child:

- Settle down after a busy day
- Learn how to read

## Have meals together as much as possible.

This is a great way to spend time together and share family traditions, while also teaching good eating habits and table manners.



## TAKE TIME TO TALK AND LISTEN

Children feel important when adults take the time to talk with them. Talking often, and about many things, helps them gain self-confidence.

**Ask about friendships and the activities that your child enjoys.**

**Talk about your own best and worst experiences.**

Ask your child:

- “What was the best part of today?”
- “What was the hardest part of today?”

Let your child know that it’s OK to have and talk about negative feelings. Share the best and hard parts of your day. This teaches your child that we all have ups and downs.

## ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY

When young children copy everyday household tasks, they are really learning how to contribute. With your support, tasks will soon be done with few reminders. As children grow older, they can begin to take on real responsibilities, such as:

- Setting the table
- Putting away their toys
- Feeding the pets
- Placing dirty clothes in a basket

Watch your child’s self-esteem grow when given the chance to help out.

## ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENCE IN DRESSING AND BATHING

At first, this may take a little more time than helping your child get dressed or take a bath, but it is time well spent. Independence comes with practice, and with your guidance.

If you get the clothes ready the night before, the morning routine will involve only getting dressed. This way, your child can focus on just one thing.

Your child may need to be reminded of all the steps.

1. “In the morning, when you get up,
2. First, use the bathroom,
3. Then, take off your PJs,
4. And then, put on your clothes.”

Praise your child’s efforts and successes: “You did a great job getting yourself ready for school today!”

## TEACH SIMPLE RULES ABOUT SAFETY WITH ADULTS

Keeping children safe is an important job for parents. You want your child to respect and trust others, but you also need to teach your child to be careful.

Following are some simple rules and ways that you can start a conversation with your child about different safety issues.

**“If you’re not sure, ask me.”**

“If an adult asks you to do something that you’re not sure is OK, always ask me first. I won’t get mad at you for asking.”

**“No secrets.”**

“No one should ever tell you to keep a secret from me—one that might make me mad if I found out. Adults should never expect you to do this.”

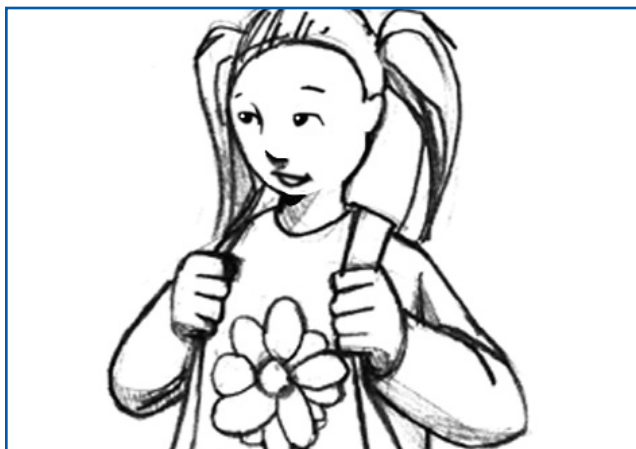
**“Certain body parts are private.”**

“No adults (except parents, doctors, and nurses) should touch you where you normally wear a bathing suit.”

**“If we get separated, find a security guard or police officer.”**

“This is a very busy place. If you can’t find me, find a security guard or police officer, or ask someone to help you find one. That person will help you find me.”

When you take your child to a crowded place, look around and point out the person who is there to help if you do become separated.



## HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME A GOOD FRIEND

Four- to six-year-olds are learning what it means to be a friend. They will have fun times as well as arguments and hurt feelings. It can be tempting for parents to try to solve these problems themselves or by talking with the other child's parent.

Instead, guide your child to solve problems. With your help, your child can learn how to solve social problems.

### 1. Help your child understand the other child's point of view.

"I guess Suzie wants a turn too."

### 2. Teach your child the following:

- Stay calm
- Do not hit, grab, or shove
- Use words:
  - "I get **upset** when you talk to me like that."
  - "I'm **sad** you don't want to play with me."
  - "I'm **angry** you took the ball from me."

### 3. Stand close by and watch as the children solve their problem.

Being close by puts the children on their best behavior. This is how they begin to develop the confidence and skills to communicate honestly, calmly, and politely with others.

Connected Kids are Safe, Strong, and Secure

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