

On Becoming Independent

Independence /inde'pendens/ > n. 1. the state or quality of being independent. 2. freedom from control, influence, support, or aid from others.

The desire to have an influence over the decisions that affect our lives is universal. To operate effectively within the world, to be self-sufficient, and ultimately to experience the satisfaction that it provides. Our desire for this influence begins early in life and continues to evolve as we grow and develop. It is that part of us that makes us who we are, enables us to recognize our talents, and ultimately to follow our dreams. From a parent's perspective, the desire for independence in their children is also universal...and a significant challenge. This is true at every stage of a child's development, but is especially true during adolescence. With the added complication of special needs, this stage of young adulthood is exceedingly difficult to navigate as a parent.

For a child to become independent they must begin a process of expanding skills and competence that starts at infancy and continues throughout life. This process however is not easy. Anxiety, apprehension, disappointment, and yes joy, are all part of this experience. It is something that we must do ourselves, but is not something that we can do alone. It is a significant challenge requiring a balance of support, internal motivation, and sometimes a few "persuasive nudges" to keep us on track. This requires much hard work on the part of the parent. It also becomes increasingly difficult over time. Those parenting skills that worked at age eight, ten, twelve, and even sixteen are no longer effective as young adulthood approaches. Finding the perfect timing between nudges and support is now very unclear, parents receive mixed signals from their child, and as is often the case for parents of special needs children, there are few answers within traditional books on parenting. Complicated by the reality that school is often not the supportive academic and social learning environment that it is for their peers, most parents are at a loss for how to support and facilitate appropriate steps toward independence.

From the perspective of a child striving to become an independent developing young adult, the situation is equally complicated. They want to spread their wings, test their ability to make decisions, set their own curfew, to operate without supervision and feedback, and even to live on their own. They want to be "like their peers". And they most certainly do not want their parents telling them what to do! Their complication lies in the awareness of deficits, misperceptions about what their same-age peers are actually doing, confusion about what is possible in their lives, fear, the desire to become independent, and an often under-developed ability to do so successfully. These adolescents and aspiring young adults are still in need of high levels of support, but are unable to achieve independence if they are having limited success academically and with peers, or are being home-schooled.

Home is place to grow and develop, to move away from, and to then return when in need of support and comfort. It is a safe place from which new adventures may begin. As a young child, "moving away" may include sleeping over at a friend's house or going to the store alone, while as an adolescent and aspiring young adult it means exploring identities that are different from their parents, driving, and yes, even rebelling. Each represents an important step in this "moving away" process, and is essential to building the confidence needed to face future challenges as one becomes increasingly independent.

For students with special needs this is essential in establishing themselves as someone separate from their parents. It enables them to become someone who is confident in their ability to make sound decisions, and possibly someone who can successfully choose to do things differently than their parents.

Despite their unique challenges, and arguably because of them, these young adults need an opportunity to “move away” and stretch their boundaries beyond the confines of home, and to experience the important social learning that occurs as they interact with peers. They need real world experiences and freedom, in combination with the emotional, social, behavioral and academic support. It is within this setting that they can learn to depend more on themselves, to problem-solve daily dilemmas, to confront adversity, and to experience the joys of success. It can also be a place where it is possible to make mistakes, big or small, and receive the support necessary to learn from them. It is through this universal experience that we all achieve independence.

Humanex Academy I believe provides this type of environment. Structured enough to challenge and push a student’s comfort zone sufficiently to facilitate growth and development, while flexible enough to meet the individual needs of the person. Humanex Academy is unified by the goal of fostering growth and independence, as we strive to help each student reach their full potential. Most importantly, this is accomplished within a nurturing and safe social environment with same-age peers struggling with very similar issues. Within this environment friendships develop, increased independence occurs, and the possibility for a future as a confident young adult comes into focus.

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