
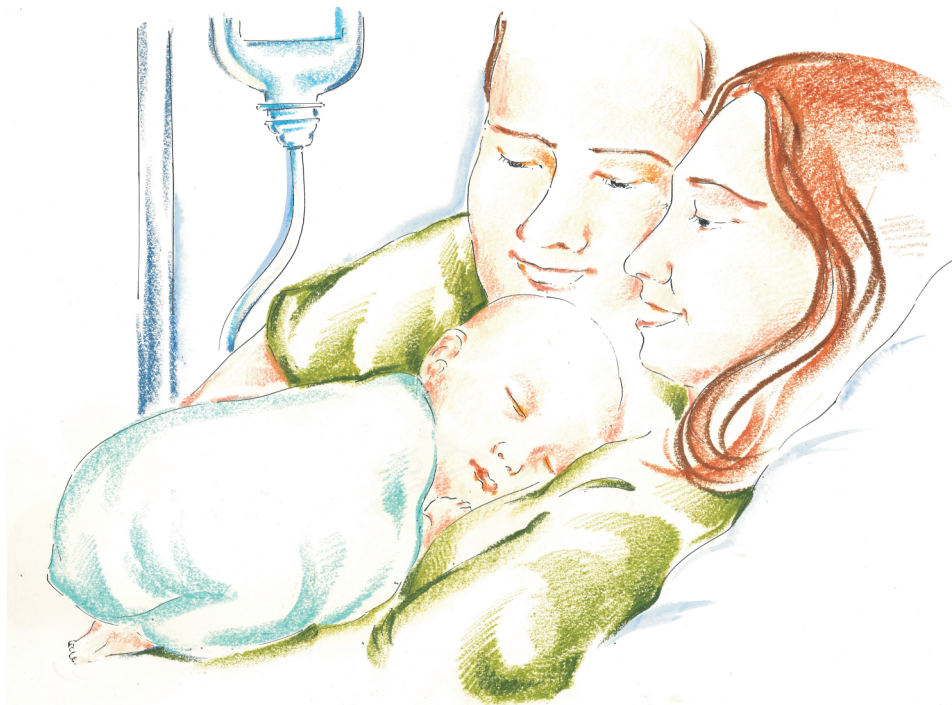


Any child who is self-sufficient,  
who can tie his shoes,  
dress or undress himself,  
reflects in his joy and  
sense of achievement  
the image of human dignity,  
which is derived from a sense of  
independence.

*Maria Montessori,  
The child in the Family*



*Welcome to this world, my baby, my Akira! I am ecstatic to finally see you and hold you in my arms. But a tiny, wistful part of me misses your weight and even the kicks from within. I know that you are born to carve out your independence. I have to accept that you are an individual; an independent person and that soon every step you take will be towards making it on your own. I can already imagine you saying your first word, taking your first steps; I can even picture you walking out of the door to your first day at school."*




## *Independence*

### *Help me Help Myself*

*Y*our baby's birth is her first act of independence; her first attempt at becoming an individual. The push to achieve independence is palpable with the snip of the umbilical cord. It is a natural and spontaneous liberation following the gestation within the mother for more than 9 months. Ironically, a baby's first attempt at independence is followed by extreme dependence. While she is in the womb, nature has the upper hand, and provides the essential ingredients. In contrast, a new born baby is ready to breathe and feed independently. As a foetus, she did not have to make any effort to get nutrition and oxygen. But after birth, getting independent of the mother, the tables turn. The baby is completely dependent on the parents for food, love and care. She has to now use her mouth to suckle at mum's breast instead of relying on the placenta to nourish her. And the mother in turn provides the baby with *colostrum* (the first secretion from the lactating mother) that builds her immunity. While introducing the concept of independence as relevant even for the new born baby, there is no denying the fact that your defenceless new born baby is entirely reliant on you for all the care and nurturing, especially in the initial days.

As the months roll by, the baby's need for independence will become more and more evident. Notice, how when you clothe the baby, she has already fumbled her arms into the sleeves. At dinnertime, she tries to grab the spoon you are using to feed her. When it's reading time, she wants to turn the pages of the book. The rolling, the crawling and ultimately, the walking are all indicators of your baby's independent side. These are signs of your baby's attempts to achieve independence; an entirely natural occurrence. These independent footsteps surge ahead and soon enough your little one will be ready to leave the nest!



*"I want to eat by myself. I want to wear my clothes on my own. I want to clean up the mess I make. All on my own. Please would you let me?"*

Sunil narrates the moment he realised his baby had an inherent independent streak.

*“We go every day to pick up Maya's brother from school. She loves this little routine of ours. As soon as she spots me picking up the car keys, she sits and bounces, until I put her shoes on and strap her into the car seat. One day after I picked up the car keys, I noticed that it was going to rain and quickly went to grab an umbrella. When I came out, Maya was sitting near the front door, holding her shoe, trying to open the Velcro fasteners with her mouth! Although she had recently started crawling, I was surprised that she had moved so quickly from the hall to the front door and picked up her shoes by herself. I was amazed at how easily my 9-month-old had learnt to be independent. Although I would have liked it better if she had used her fingers rather than her mouth to open the shoe fasteners!*

Funnily enough, when babies reveal their hunger for independence; it is, more often than not, the parents who are reluctant to allow the baby what she is hungering after. As new parents, it is but natural to take pride in doing everything for your baby. In the process, we tend to go overboard trying to assist the baby a bit too much. However, despite noticing that the baby is demonstrating an overwhelming urge to 'do it herself', the tendency to help the baby, more than is required, wins most of the times. The excuse cited is usually lack of time or convenience. But in doing so, are we not disregarding the child's need to be independent in the bargain? Are we allowing the overly protective nature of parenthood to cloud our perception of good parenting? The Gurukul system of education in ancient India advocated the principle of inculcating independence in children. Children lived with their guru and learnt how to be self-dependent individuals. But today the scenario has altered a lot. Would you let your child clean up after a painting session? Or let's say, you are having guests over for lunch; would you ask your little one to set the table with your expensive crockery? Or help you with the cooking; at least the things that do not require use of hot surfaces or sharp knives?

Examples from across the world abound involving a new phenomenon called

'Helicopter Parenting'. A Helicopter Parent is someone who pays extremely close attention to their child's or children's experiences and problems. The term originally appeared in 1969, in the book *Between Parent and Teenager* by Dr Haim Ginott, a child psychologist and a school teacher. Socio-cultural changes have resulted in increased instances of 'over-parenting'. Research shows the emergence of 'The Little Emperor Syndrome', referring to Mainland China's one-child policy, where children of modern upper class and wealthier Chinese families gain seemingly excessive amounts of attention from their parents and grandparents. Such over-parenting leads to children being dependent on their parents instead of achieving independence and confidence.

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Dr. Maria Montessori has this timeless advice for parents who are grappling with the notion of independence in children.

*“The child's development follows a path of successive stages of independence, and our knowledge of this must guide us in our behaviour towards him. We have to help the child to act, will and think for himself.*

Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

### Types of Independence

It might come as a surprise to you that your baby can accomplish so many forms of independence. But a huge number of parents do not readily acknowledge the need for independence in babies as emotions play a big part here. The reasons also range from traditional, established culture to the present day social dynamics. When asked what they wanted most for their children, most parents responded with answers like 'well-settled', 'good education' or 'good life'; which essentially translates to financial independence as they become adults. When your little one ties herself into a knot trying to wear her tee-shirt (physical independence) or refuses to go to the new neighbour trying to pick her up (intellectual independence) or even when she is able to control her bowel till she reaches the toilet (independence in personal care), she is demonstrating different types of independences. In each form of independence, the baby gets Nature's help to kick start. And thereafter, each form of independence can be given a boost, with a bit of help from you, the parents.

### Physical Independence

Madhavi paints an emotional picture of her daughter's first day of school that is downright relatable.

*"I vividly remember Lakshmi's first day of school. I had not slept well, anxious about how she would react to staying away from us and her home for so long. When we approached the school for admission, she was happy enough to play with the other children. But it bothered me a lot to accept that she would be on her own for those few hours with people she hardly knew. I guess it was way too difficult for me to acknowledge the fact that my child was ready to take her step towards independence. I couldn't ignore the wrenching ache in me."*

*"The school bus arrived and I was trying to smile and hold back my tears for Lakshmi's sake. My husband kept a strong hold on me, for fear that I would run after her. Lakshmi calmly picked up her bag and got on the bus. She turned around and waved to me saying, "Bye darling, I'll see you in the evening!" I burst into a giggle because those were the exact words my husband says when he goes off to work. Her first word, her first step, and now her first day at school. My child is indeed ready to face the world."*

### Signs of Physical Independence

In the initial months, every single action of the baby, every milestone, is a move towards independence.



At six months, soft food can be introduced to the baby in addition to breast milk. This is the beginning of the process of weaning and technically, the juncture where the baby starts getting independent of the mother. Then as the first tooth erupts, this independence gets a further boost.



Around 8 months is when the baby's sphincter muscles (these muscles control the passing of stools) start strengthening. Until these muscles are developed, the baby has no control over the excretory actions. We will look at this development

in detail in the chapter on Toilet Training. This is the beginning of toilet training, which is another form of independence for the baby. This is also when the parents can share the baby care duties more equally. The more independent the baby gets of the mother, the more chances there are for the father to pitch in.



Did you know that your baby is capable of sleeping on her own? It sounds like a highly unlikely suggestion, isn't it? However, it is a fact that when we maintain order in environment by setting sleep habits and sticking to the patterns established, baby will sleep by herself. A well-fed, comfortable and dry baby is capable of falling asleep without any aid. Rocking the baby to sleep, singing to her till she sleeps or even allowing baby to suck on her thumb in order to go to sleep are in fact factors of classic conditioning, without which baby will refuse to sleep the next time! Just as Chinese children are conditioned to eating with chopsticks as children and the attribute stays for life. Certain habits, that

are actually unwarranted, can be nipped in the bud helping babies become more independent.

*"Mumma, my tummy needs to be full, my nappy should be dry and my bed needs to be comfortable. I will fall sleep by myself."*

The moment when the child realises that if she calls out to her mother, she will turn around to look at her, is a moment of linguistic independence. This is the start of a long sojourn for the child on the linguistic independence highway.

The most evident of the various types of physical independence is movement. When the baby starts lifting her neck and rolls over, she is preparing to move

away. Being able to move at will is one of the significant manifestations of independence. Animal babies walk within hours of being born, and human babies slowly acquire the various movements over months of practise. This essentially makes the first independent movement a very emotional moment.

Once the baby is able to move around and catch hold of things without waiting for adult intervention, she exhibits an extremely strong fascination for sensorial experiences. She grabs anything she can reach or crawl up to. This is when the parent's role increases manifold, trying to ensure safety! But these sensorial experiences are essential and should be encouraged. A light touch of a warm plate, brush of soft flannel on her cheeks or holding a kiwi fruit will help the baby understand what the qualities of heat, softness and coarseness are.

#### Emotional Independence

An alternating sequence of attachment and detachment plays a major role in the child's first few years. The child swings between attachment and detachment with the parent. The primary attachment happens at conception, when the sperm attaches itself to the egg and fertilises it. And the original detachment is when the baby leaves the womb and enters the outside world.

Further signs of detachment appear when the baby's tooth appears and she is ready to move from mother's milk to pureed or blended solid feed. She is no longer completely dependent on the mother for food. This is followed by her beginning to crawl which causes tangible separation. From being capable of flailing only her legs and hands, and being carried around, she quickly makes the transition to be able to establish physical distance.

*"I crawl away with speed. But when I have gone a distance I remember you and turn around to make sure you are watching and have not disappeared! Although I'm ready to put a small gap between us, I still need you and your reassuring smile."*

Each milestone in the baby's life adds another rung to the ladder of independence that helps the baby conquer the heights of human life skills. Despite knowing that the entire process is inevitable and is Nature's dictum, the independence displayed by the baby will undeniably tug at the parent's heart strings. It can be as painful as the birthing process itself. But the reigning factor here has to be the line drawn between emotional fortification and fostering emotional dependency. It can be quite an ask to expect a parent not to intervene until the child has a fall and scrapes her knees. But unless the baby is given the opportunity to learn to walk, and possibly fall too, she will not achieve that independence.

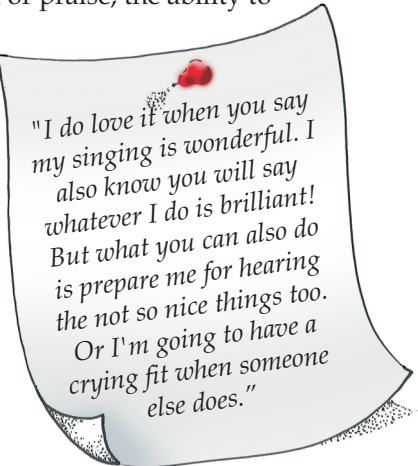
*"Real protection means teaching children to manage risks on their own, not shielding them from every hazard."*

Wendy Mogel, *Clinical Psychologist*

*New York Times*, best selling author, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

*"Arhaan was always inclined towards working with crayons. I could sit him down with a box of crayons and some sheets of blank paper and he would gladly fill it all up with scribbles and doodles. He would sit colouring patiently and since I used to work from home, that was a blessing for me. One day he finished colouring a page and walked up to me with a proud smile, to show me his artwork. I was busy with a project and praised his work lavishly to encourage him to do more and selfishly since I wanted to finish my work too! After that day he would get up every time he finished a page and walk up to me for a compliment. Until I took my eyes off my laptop and said some good words about his work, he would not budge! I was puzzled at the change in him. He used to be happy just to sit and colour for hours without requiring any approval from me. Zaira says, "It was as if he was craving for compliments and couldn't go on without a good word from me." So, I changed tacks and now every time he comes up to me with a crayon filled page, we discuss the drawings and I ask him to explain it to me. He no longer requires me to endorse his work now!"*

When children get reliant on parents' approval or praise, the ability to self-assess might elude them. While it is not a dire situation, it does undermine their emotional independence. It definitely is too easy to praise your little one's effort, and in some instances, it is only natural to do so. However, it incites a sense of craving for more praise. On the other hand, emotionally independent children nurture confidence, by this ability, to be their own critique.



*"I do love it when you say my singing is wonderful. I also know you will say whatever I do is brilliant! But what you can also do is prepare me for hearing the not so nice things too. Or I'm going to have a crying fit when someone else does."*

### Social Independence

*"Neil was about 3 years old when I felt ignored by him for the first time! It was a tradition of sorts in our family for the father and son to bond at the beach. I always took Neil to play in the water and make sand castles while Sheila lounged under the beach umbrella. From when he could sit by himself, we had been taking him to the beach. And we always completely enjoyed ourselves in the sea and on the beach. Last June when we went to the beach he spotted some kids playing on the beach. Just as I was getting ready to build sand castles, Neil picked up the beach ball and ran shouting, "Papa while you make the sand castle, I'll go and play with those kids, okay!"*

Josh recalls how his son, Neil, discovered his social independence and left him holding the sand bucket and pail!

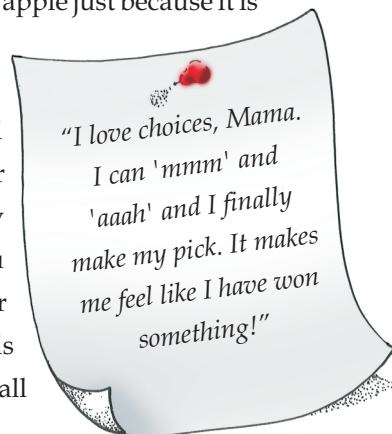
You must remember that the baby has been absorbing the nuances and the way people around her have been displaying courtesy and politeness. At two-and-a-half your little one is ready to emulate these values. So, she will now mirror the way she has received grace and courtesy. For example, a child who has seen her household help being treated with respect for the work that she does, will instinctively show regard for dignity of labour.

### Intellectual independence

*"Pihu has a very strong independent streak in her," says Shaina. The day she was going on a farm visit from her play school, she surprised me when she showed me her school bag, stuffed to the full, looking like a balloon about to burst! When I asked her what she was carrying in her bag she said it was food for the farm animals. Holding back my giggle, I asked her to show me and she took out bags of carrots, spinach and even frozen corn! She said in an assured voice, "We are allowed to feed the animals. So, I packed my bag in the morning."*

Intellectual independence in a child will become evident when she stops acting solely on the powers vested by nature in her and begins to use her mental faculties. As a new born baby, her use of hands and senses aid her understanding of various things. As she gains linguistic independence over the first year, she can ask questions to feed her curiosity and intellect. A few more months down the line when she plans her day just like Pihu, she would be honing her planning skills.

The first sign of the baby making her own choice will probably be as inconspicuous as choosing to go or not to the person waiting to carry her with welcoming and open arms. Baby preferring not to complete her bowl of food would again be her choice. These are instances of the baby making her own decisions; a sign of her intellectual independence. When parents offer the baby a choice, she uses logic, reasoning or just personal likes or dislikes to make up her mind. She could choose the banana over the apple just because it is softer or because she likes the colour yellow better than red, but she has made her intellectual choice! This is where the parents and care givers play a role in stimulating her intellect. Queries like "Would you like to play with the building blocks or the ball?" or "Do you want to hear a new story or shall I read your favourite book to you again?" work towards building the baby's decisiveness and overall confidence.



### Spiritual Independence

A child who can dress herself, carry her own bag, and talk and be understood by others has achieved a level of independence that makes her confident and emotionally independent. When the child can comprehend the grace and courtesy that is essential for social interaction and easily make friends, she achieves social independence. And drawing on the strength of sensorial experiences, she enhances her intellectual independence. When a child has experienced all these types of independence, it is inevitable that she feels spiritually independent; where she is happy, positive and self-assured.



### The Parents' Role

Every milestone that the baby crosses is a step ahead in her achieving independence. Her first word is linguistic independence, her first friend signifies social independence and her first step is independence of movement. This might sound radical, but it needs to be acknowledged that children are born to be independent. That is why unlike animal babies, human babies take their time acquiring each type of independence. And with adult support, a superior level of independence can be accomplished. On the other hand, when we do not foster independence in children, Julie Lythcott-Haims, Former Stanford Dean, says,

*"We absolve our kids of doing the work or chores around the house, and then they end up as young adults in the workplace still waiting for a checklist, but it doesn't exist."*

The parents' role is earmarked as facilitators, whose main task is to make their children independent. Ask yourselves these questions whenever you do something for your child - "Am I helping her become independent or am I making her more reliant on me?"

When giving baby a bath, do you allow her to pour water or apply soap on her little body by herself? Do you give her a small mug to be able to wash off the soap suds?

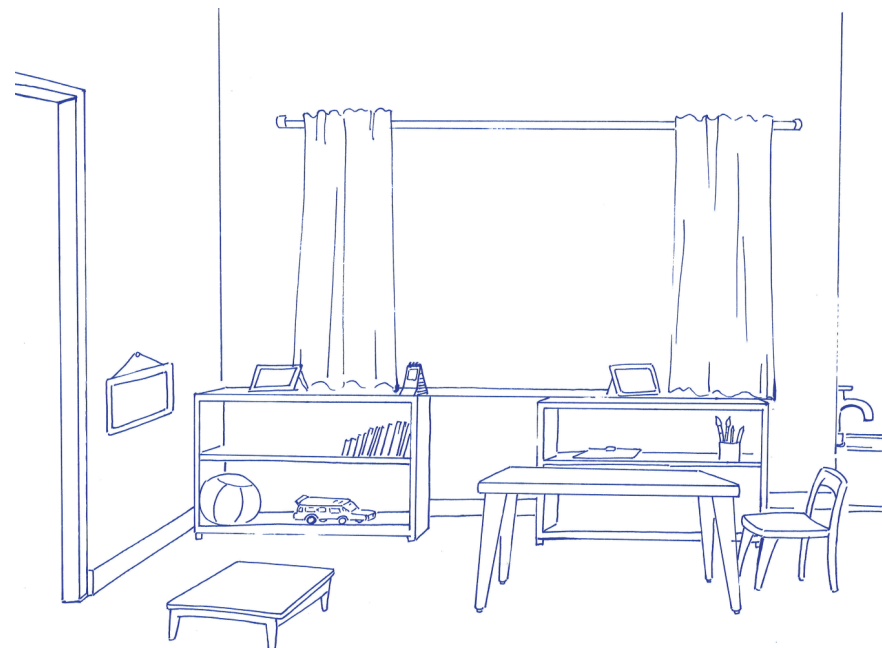
While getting her ready for school do you bring the shoe to her? Do you lift her foot and put it into the shoe or do you allow her to put it in herself?

Next time you look at the neighbour's baby who eats by himself or puts on his own shoes, do not think "Oh how I wish my baby would do that too." Just allow or rather, make certain that your little one does things by herself. If we always carry her bag or dress her up, just so we can finish the task quickly, she will get conditioned to thinking that we will do it for her forever. The idea is not that we should not help her at all. Don't get it wrong. The idea is to teach her to do it herself and help her only when necessary or when she asks you to. A few spills and many mistakes later, she will also organically learn to be independent. It is an inherent trait that gets diluted when excessive help is offered.

A little extra thought and a few changes at home will help your child get more independent. A washbasin at 3 feet above the ground would dissuade your little one from washing her own hands, but a

little step stool placed to help her reach the tap would work wonders. Likewise, arranging her clothes at the bottom shelf of the cupboard would encourage her to get her own clothes out or fold and put them back in. Using round edged, non-sharp cutlery would assist her to eat by herself.

"I can do a lot of things by myself. But it will not be perfect. I will spill bright orange carrot puree on our living room carpet. I will get my shoelaces into a knot. And I most certainly will fall before I learn to walk. Stand by me and I will get better."

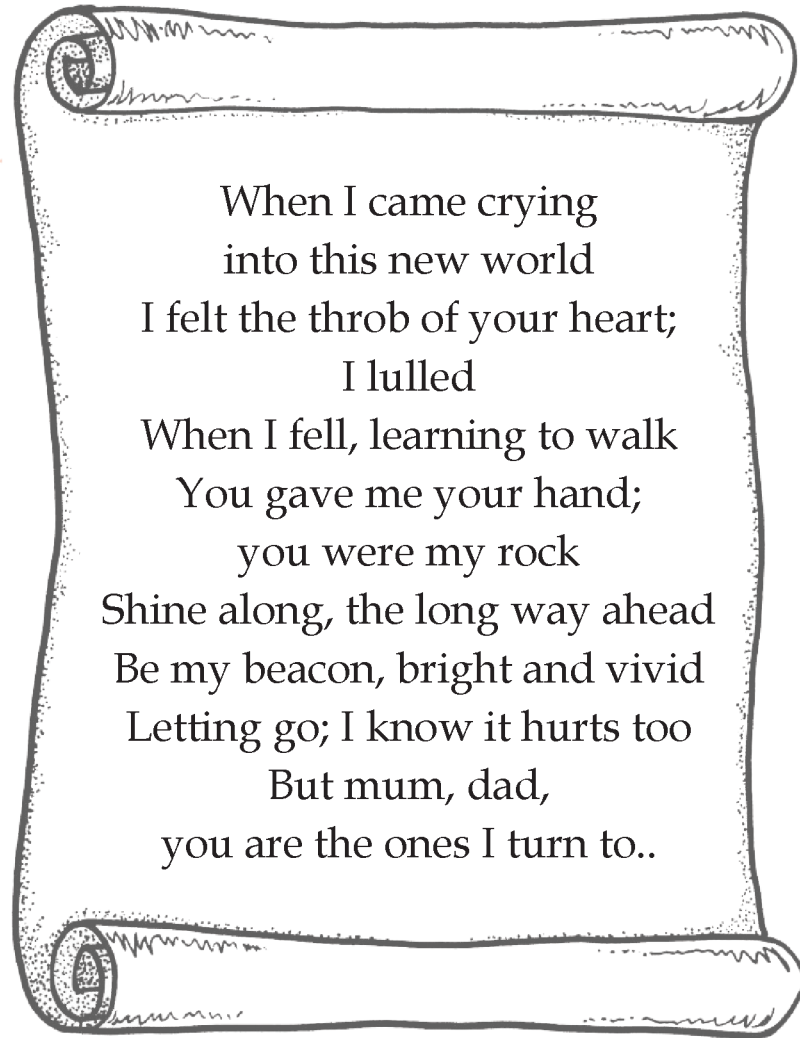


*A child's room with open shelves, child size furniture, child height utilities, etc.*

*"It is by helping the child to help himself we render him that help which will make him independent."*

*Maria Montessori, What You Should Know About Your Child*

Parents all over the world have different ways of bringing up children. The Japanese allow their young ones, aged 2 or 3, to accompany their older brothers or sisters by themselves on the train or to the market. In the Western world, parents rarely feed their children after they have learnt to grip the spoon on their own. Every culture has a different approach to the level of independence they allow their children. But the bottom line is that independence is of paramount importance to the child. From the moment the umbilical cord is cut, they are destined to be independent beings. And thereafter every effort contributes to independence of various sorts.



When I came crying  
into this new world  
I felt the throb of your heart;  
I lulled  
When I fell, learning to walk  
You gave me your hand;  
you were my rock  
Shine along, the long way ahead  
Be my beacon, bright and vivid  
Letting go; I know it hurts too  
But mum, dad,  
you are the ones I turn to..