

Kids Have Autonomy

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“And whether the child is to grow from within, whether all that craves expression will be permitted to come forth toward the light of day” – Emma Goldman

Every adult understands, on an instinctual level and based on our own experience as people, that children are *important*. And that childhood is important. Kids are free and wonderful little beings, full of an intrinsic curiosity and desire to learn: everything is new to them, and so everything is equally fascinating and worthy of exploration. The toys on the floor, the painting on the wall, the fluttering of leaves on a sunny day; all things to be seen, or touched, or tasted, and – eventually – understood through the broader framework of the cultures we are born into. This is how we learn – every single one of us. A child grows and develops by exploring the world around them, by having the freedom to interact with other people, other animals, and the myriad places and colors and things of which our world is made. In the fundamental and fragile years between birth and adulthood, we learn not just the names and shapes of things; we are also taught what to fear, what to love, and to what we might one day be capable.

The life of the child is not something over which the caregiver can ever exert full control, though many will, and do, try. And this is how it should be, because children are not blank slates or lumps of clay to be molded by other beings. They are individuals, as all people are, with complex thoughts and feelings: far more than the sum of their parts, and far more than they may yet express to those who want to control them. Every parent knows that children will reject the apparent authority of their caregivers in the search for autonomy very early on – just as soon as they recognize themselves as themselves, and even before they learn the word *No* (one of the most important words a child knows). This rejection is utterly natural, but it isn't often perceived that way. Well-meaning, loving parents and educators often respond to children's assertion of self with frustration and anger. “What do you mean *no* – you have to eat what's on your plate!” Or, “What do you mean *no*, we *have* to go outside for a walk now – you don't have a choice.” Caregivers know that they know best; they're adults after all, and a two year old might not yet grasp the implications of continuing to wear a dirty diaper, for instance, until they learn for themselves. (In childhood development these are called “natural consequences” – i.e., if you keep that dirty diaper on, you'll quickly see for yourself, because it's going to get really uncomfortable.)

Adults and caregivers may know better, but it's a mistake to assume they always know *best*. They only know what they themselves have been taught, after all, and may carry with them any

number of traumas from their own lives; in fact, most of us do. We live, collectively, on a planet that has witnessed untold generations of abuse: in the form of wars, genocides, oppression, colonialism, enclosure. We now rush headlong into environmental devastation, as entire populations suffer under catastrophic hurricanes, floods, heat waves and droughts. Many of us come from dark places already, with parents or grandparents who have fled warzones, or died fleeing them – or lived under the impossible trauma of systemic oppression – or all of these things at once. Intergenerational trauma passes on to our children in this way: because it has never passed out of us in the first place. We reenact the violences committed against us not because we bear the next generation any ill-will, but because it is the only way we know how to be: in a state of violence, perpetually.

But kids don't know any of this when they're kids. What they do know, instinctively and with a passion that is literally or figuratively forced into uneasy submission by the time they've entered the school system, is that they have autonomy. They know what the word "no" means, and so they say it. They push against the control and the commands of their caregivers, whom they also love with the fullness of their hearts, because they understand – as all people do – that relationships are a conversation. Relationships are negotiation, compromise, and reciprocity; they are asking and answering, and they are the word *No*.

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