

The Childhood Treasure of Independence

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The 7 Childhood Treasures—capacities for Trust, Independence, Faith, Negotiation, Vision, Compromise, and Acceptance—should be built in your first seven years of life (see the article *Childhood's Wisdom*). The 7 Childhood Treasures are all built in the process of individuation, but the second treasure, Independence, is the most obvious cornerstone of this construction process.

Independence isn't freedom from the control, influence, support and aid of others. In the context of the 7 Childhood Treasures, it is freedom from control and *choice* over influence, support and aid. As a Childhood Treasure, Independence is not isolation; it is separation with interaction. In the parlance of psychology, this treasure is about boundaries.

Boundaries are simply the edges of who you are. Your most visible boundary is your skin; it forms your physical boundary. It is where you stop and everything that is *not you* begins. If you had the support to build boundaries during your second year of life, then you also have intellectual, psychological, and emotional boundaries.

As a young toddler, you began formation of your psychological and intellectual boundaries the first time you uttered "No," the first word spoken by the vast majority of young children. "No" is toddler-speak for a much longer message. If you could, you would have said something like, "That's a nice idea, but I have something else in mind. Instead of a bath now, I'd like to play a bit longer with these blocks."

What kind of boundaries do you have now? Are they so permeable that you simply take on the values, thoughts, feelings or desires of others? Have you ever felt that you had no self of your own? When have you acted as if your body didn't exist or didn't deserve your attention? Have you ever let your needs be eclipsed, over-shadowed by the needs of another?

Have you ever felt that very little of your thoughts, feelings, desires, and values could "hold their own" against those of your friends, partners, coworkers or family members? Have you ever pushed your body's needs to one side because they would inconvenience you ... or another? When have you found yourself willing to give in to what others believed or thought, rather than have a different opinion or need? Have you ever compromised who you are for the sake of avoiding being different, avoiding disagreement?

Have you ever been confident that your thoughts/feelings/desires were the most important—the "only ones worth having?" Have you ever physically overwhelmed another person ... even with a hug or gentle touch she didn't ask for? Have you

ever found yourself over-sharing ... telling people too much about yourself too soon? When have you told somebody your life story within the first hour you knew him?

These questions all describe boundaries that are “mushy”—soft or thin, over-permeable. Mushy boundaries are not strong enough to allow you to be a separate, unique person in the world.

Healthy, strong boundaries look quite different from mushy ones. They let you know who you are and let you express what you believe, what you feel, and what you want—simply, clearly, without aggression or defensiveness. With healthy boundaries, you can listen without aggression or defensiveness to others express what they believe, feel and want, even when you have quite different beliefs, feelings and desires. Healthy boundaries allow you to know what your body wants and needs and to provide it or ask for it. You can calmly state your own interests without feeling the need to qualify or explain them.

Have you ever said, “Here’s what I think, feel, want....,” without fear of rejection, without feeling pushy or greedy? Have you disagreed with someone else’s ideas or had feelings different from another’s and known you were acceptable in your difference . . . and so was the other person—both of you perfectly okay *and* different? Can you consider another point of view, desire, or feeling that differs from your own without needing to aggressively defend yours?

These are the signs of healthy boundaries. Do you have them? Do you have them with some people in your life but not with others? If your awareness of your boundaries is new, then your boundaries are, perhaps, made of fragile materials. What do you see, if you imagine what your boundaries are made of? Do you see steel walls that protect against all incursions? Do you see balsa wood that splinters easily on impact? Do you see rice paper that tears with the pressure of a fingertip?

Awareness of the strength of your boundaries helps you know two things. First, you know what kinds of pressure to keep away from. If your boundaries are young and vulnerable, formed from fragile materials, then you don’t put them into the wind tunnel of certain relationships or events: for some Thanksgiving with the biological family, for others a meeting with the boss. Second, when you become aware of the strength of your boundaries, you know when you need to shore them up with stronger materials; you know you need to build them better.