

Contagious Dependency Has Long-Term Effects

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My experiences, working with the developmentally disabled for the last decade, have brought me to the belief that the natural tendency to want to care and nurture a child, so that nothing else bad will ever happen to them, can actually result in more damage to their well-being.

Dependency is reliance on another person for aid and support. Usually, when a child is born, parents have many hopes, dreams, and ideas for the future for their child. They want nothing but the best, such as a college education, a happy marriage, and a successful career. However, when parents learn that their child has a developmental disability, the natural expectations of parents may change to feelings of intense guilt, shame, and responsibility.

All children are dependent on their parents and are taught, as they grow up, to become independent. When a child is born with a developmental disability, however, parents often disregard the natural instinct to encourage independence. This can create a serious dependency, even for simple tasks such as clothes selection, dressing, shoe tying, simple meal preparation, that remains into adulthood. Parents can become addicted to providing *too much care* for their child and then they do not encourage any ability or capacity in the child to care for themselves. More often than not, these parents need their children to need them. They *depend upon their children* to be dependent upon them. Through this contagious dependency process, parents and developmentally disabled children transfer dependency back and forth, until the child is utterly helpless without the parent.

When parents pass away their adult child is left without the necessary skills to be independent, and they are either placed in a board and care home or passed on to other family members. If they are thrust into new environments, where they are expected to be more self reliant, a variety of serious emotional and behavioral problems can result. These individuals were *trained* to rely on others. They were conditioned to be dependent, and that is a hard habit to break—fortunately not impossible.

With patience, dedication, and consistency, they can be retrained to unlearn their dependent ways and challenge themselves. Here are some tips on both how to avoid contagious dependency in the first place or reverse the process and help to motivate and strengthen a developmentally disabled person to be more independent:

1. ***Concentrate on what a person CAN DO, or COULD DO with practice, not what they can't do.***
2. **Provide goals for the person to do things they haven't tried before. For example, if a developmentally disabled person can write their own name, but**



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- has never learned to tie his shoes, learning how to tie shoes would be a good goal.
3. Provide rewards, that the person will want to receive, for the accomplishment of new goals.
 4. Set aside at least 5-10 minutes *every day* to work on mastering a previous goal or working on the achievement of a new goal.
 5. Praise all efforts and acknowledge every level of progress.
 6. Let others in the person's life know what current goals are and ask them to help encourage goal attainment and the growth of a person's independence.

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