

Teaching Kids Life Skills

By Christine Field

The irresponsible teenage boy has become a caricature of modern adolescence: He can't find his schoolbooks to do his homework. He regularly runs out of clean underwear. He has to borrow money from Dad to go to the mall.

"Cooking" consists of operating a microwave oven. Teen girls often do not fare much better.

These young people are at the age when they will soon launch into the real world, but have they been equipped to handle it?



During my early years of parenting, I had a mistaken notion that childhood was a time of endless fun, and that parents were kind of like cruise directors for their kids. Now I have two young adults and two teens, and I've come to realize that childhood is a training ground for the real world.

Imagine your child at her first job or in her first apartment. What skills do you want her to bring to these settings? Do you want her to understand [how to interact with others](#)? How to manage her time, money and belongings? Maybe you want her to figure out a few basic skills like doing her own laundry.

Interactions with others

Chances are excellent that your son or daughter will someday land a job, get married and encounter various conflicts and disagreements. Can your child handle that tension? He'll be better equipped if he's had to deal with and resolve conflict in his formative years.

Sibling interactions are great practice for the inevitable conflicts in marriage and employment. Quarrels are a part of family life. Learning to disagree while maintaining self-control and respect for the other party may take years, but it's worth the effort.

During one season, my children were particularly brutal to one another. Without disclosing the reason, I had them trace their bodies on large sheets of paper, and I hung them up. Each time they hurt their sibling, they had to go to that child's tracing and tear off a piece of the drawing. This had a great impact on teaching them not to tear one another down.

Time management

Consider tracking how your family spends time over a typical week to give you perspective on all the little time wasters that are not productive or beneficial. Too much television or shopping could signal neglect in relationships.

You may also introduce your toddler to time sequences: morning, noon, evening. Today, tomorrow, yesterday. Cut out or draw pictures to make a visual timeline of his daily routine.

As your child matures, he should have his own alarm clock. This shifts responsibility to your child, and the morning battle becomes between child and the clock and not between child and Mom and Dad.

Encourage your child to stay organized with schoolwork. Your child may be noting daily responsibilities in a planner, especially if her school encourages students to track homework assignments and long-term projects. Make sure she's also turning in her assignments on time and that she stays on task while searching the Web for class projects.

From time to time, compare the pace at which your child operates with the pace required for her daily commitments. If your child is feeling rushed, find ways to alleviate stress through family time and adequate rest. Your child's time-management skills will be a cardinal asset as he enters adulthood and the workforce.

Money management

When our kids were still young, we allowed them to make financial decisions. They were able to learn and make mistakes with small sums and small stakes. Our kids had to agree on how and when to spend the money. If there were conditions to that privilege, we spelled them out. For example, we set a weekly budget for treats. When the money was spent, it was gone for the week.

Set goals for long-term savings, such as paying for summer camp, and shorter-term savings goals for things they want in the near future, such as a new toy.

Provide a way for them to divide their earnings or allowance into different categories. For example, their tithe could be 10 percent, long-term savings could be 30 percent, short-term savings 30 percent and everyday spending 30 percent. Try using jars, paper envelopes or plastic zipper bags to separate each category. This has the advantage of kids being able to see the money as it accumulates.

Organizing and decluttering

Having kids means having stuff — lots of stuff. Both parents and children need to be "stuff-savvy" to keep their possessions organized.

Keep clutter at bay by involving your children in paring down belongings and donating long-forgotten toys. Work together to sort and store items, disposing of any broken or damaged toys. Consider creating a "memory box" for each child to store treasured pieces of artwork. The box could also serve as the repository for cards, letters and other mementos.

Repair and maintenance

Once your children have proven they can take care of their belongings, they can help with the big things that require regular maintenance. Include your children in everyday household and vehicle upkeep, preparing them to be more self-reliant.

Each of our kids has enjoyed trips to the hardware store holding Dad's strong hand. Because my husband and I quickly discovered that we possess few repair skills between the two of us, we've learned the following lessons about home ownership:

- Have a sense of humor. Something always breaks. Cleaning three inches of water out of the basement might not be your choice for the day, but it can be an opportunity to teach teamwork
- Be willing to learn. When your children see you try something new, like how to apply caulk, they learn that it's possible to acquire new skills, even if those abilities aren't in their area of strength.
- Be willing to ask for help. If a home project is over your head, you can teach your children a valuable lesson by simply asking for help and then working together to accomplish the task.

Beyond home repairs, remember that basic tasks such as mowing the lawn or weeding the garden can be great learning experiences for your kids.

Homemaking basics

With all that goes into running a home, it's important to be proficient in the basic, daily tasks. Whatever my children do with their lives, however God calls them, I want them to know how to take care of themselves and their homes.

I began many of these lessons in the kitchen. I'd let them cook and help prepare food. Even a young child can spread peanut butter with a butter knife or tear lettuce for a salad. There's also much to learn from meal planning each week based on what foods are in season or on sale. The whole family can get involved in meal planning: Help your children list seven breakfasts, lunches and dinners on index cards, and work together to make a shopping list from this plan.

For older children, give them grocery flyers and a weekly budget, and have them plan the menu for the week. Math comes alive as kids make lists, check cupboards, clip coupons and keep a total on the calculator while shopping.

Let your child join you on a shopping trip for an introduction to the factors involved in making food purchases for your family such as quality, price per ounce, nutritional value, budgetary considerations, and so on. This may help your child make the connection as to why snacks from the checkout line may not be the best choice.

When doing the laundry, let your kids help you sort light and dark clothing. Even a young child can fold small towels. As your child grows, he can be responsible for loading the machines, but not before teaching him about soap and water levels, water temperatures and colors of clothes. As for stacking clothes neatly in drawers — he can do that, too.

Another important lesson is the necessity of a good attitude. When my first two kids were young, I gave them a bucket of warm, soapy water with sponges — and then put them in their bathing suits. They had a fabulous time washing the kitchen floor. I plunked them in the bathtub and mopped up the excess. I had happy kids *and* a clean floor.

Of course, not all chores are fun or need to masquerade as something else in order for your kids to keep a good attitude. Their outlook on a situation, no matter how unappealing the task, should be positive, a needed skill to develop for the real world.

Healthy habits

Family life is where healthy habits are formed. Exercise as a family, and work together to practice good nutrition. And does your daily communication support a healthy view of the body? Your words condition children in their perception of themselves — positive or negative.

You may also need to remind your kids of the basics of health and hygiene. Do they clip their nails? Are they using soap in the shower? Are they changing their undergarments at regular intervals? These things require regular upkeep, now and always. Don't let your kids get lazy with their hygiene.

As my children grow and go out to explore the world, I pray they will remember our home as a place where we celebrated, worked, fought and trained well.

Decision-Making Skills

Making good decisions involves discernment. Try these techniques to help your child make better decisions:

Look to the future.

Ask each of your children to make a list of all the big decisions they will make over the next 10 to 15 years of their life, such as college, career, car, apartment, city, marriage and children. Discuss together the factors that constitute each big decision.

Stick to the facts.

"I can't possibly join AWANA this year," your daughter sighs. "They make you memorize the whole Bible!"

"Do you know that for sure?" you ask.

Look for opportunities to teach your child about getting all the facts. Discourage conclusions based on incomplete information.

Brainstorm together.

Your child needs to choose a science project. He doesn't know where his interests lie. On a piece of paper write the word science in a cloud, and as you discuss science topics, draw branches of ideas stemming from the cloud.

As you fill in the major subjects, encourage your child to think of subtopics within those areas. Maybe the study of animals strikes a chord with him, and he remembers a longtime love of guinea pigs. Voila! He now approaches the project with enthusiasm and a sense of ownership.

List pros and cons.

Let's say your child has to choose between playing soccer and taking ballet lessons. List the pros and cons of each option to help her reach a decision.

Christine Field is the author of [Life Skills for Kids: Equipping your child for the real world](#). Article is part of a series from [focusonthefamily.com](#)