

Life Lessons for Kids and Teens: 5 Skills Every Child Needs to Learn

by Anna Stewart, Family Advocate



When my son received his GED this year, I put together a small scrapbook for him with photos, quotes, and cards from his friends. I also considered the life skills he's already mastered and thought about the ones he's still working on. The big "a-ha moment" for me? Realizing that everything else in life builds upon the ability for kids to be able to do the following five things.

"If children do not learn to think for themselves, and the adults in their lives do it for them, as teens they are much more likely to follow peers into choices that can have devastating results." —Anna Stewart

1. **Learn how to think for yourself.**
2. **Take responsibility for your actions and choices.**
3. **Learn how to solve problems and deal with obstacles.**
4. **Learn how to negotiate conflict.**
5. **Find a way to make a contribution.**

When you come right down to it, the five main skills above provide the foundation to be an engaged, compassionate and well-rounded adult. The first one is something that takes some kids a long time, while others seem to be almost born with the ability. Still, it's a skill everyone needs to master in order to know who they are and where they stand in life.

Life Skill #1: Learning How to Think for Yourself

When my son, who has ADHD, was younger, he clashed with pretty much every adult he interacted with at home, at school, in the community. He had a short fuse and would lash out at anyone he thought was judging him. He was

well-known but not well-liked. As many of you know all too well, it meant that school principals spent lots of time with him. As he got older, it also meant school detentions and suspensions, with the subsequent home grounding and consequences. He pushed against school assignments and complained about their arbitrariness. He refused to show the compliance that school requires, so he didn't get good grades. Teachers would tell him they could see he was capable, but he needed to get his attitude adjusted. My son chafed at all authority and seemed destined for a life of trouble.

His ability to think for himself did not come all at once as a teenager. It actually started when he was in kindergarten, when he refused to sit in circle (one of the main lessons of kindergarten). Instead of following the rules, my willful son (like many kids with ADHD) preferred to walk around. His teacher did not like his choice, did not want him to have that choice, and labeled him as one of the "bad" kids for what she said was "not listening" and "distracting the other children." He may have distracted them, but he *was* listening--and if she had simply asked him, he could have repeated everything she said back to her. He did this at home, too, when we read books at bedtime. He was all over the room, declining my invitation to snuggle and read, but he remembered every part of the story. It took me a while to figure his learning style out, having never parented a child with ADHD before.

Now, at nearly 20 years of age, that willful spirit has been polished and shines with the first of the essential skills: my son, through much trial and error, has learned to think for himself. Do I always agree with him or like what he thinks? Absolutely not, but I know *he knows* who he is (including his positive and not-so-positive qualities). He has learned not only to accept who he is but truly value his own mind, spirit and heart.

Learning to think for yourself requires:

- Gentle reflection back from parents and teachers about what they see as your child's skills and abilities.
- Safe opportunities to explore interests without interference.
- Noticing and praising the emerging self-awareness, acceptance and self-confidence in your child/teen.

If children do not learn to think for themselves, and the adults in their lives do it for them, as teens they are much more likely to follow peers into choices that can have devastating results. If you give your 6 year old a choice of what shirt to wear, you have to graciously allow him to wear it. If you give a choice

and then judge or change the choice, "Oh, you can't wear those pants with that shirt," you undermine their decision and teach them they can't think for themselves.

Life Skill #2. Taking Responsibility for Your Actions and Choices

It's easy to see that if you give your 8 year old freedom to wear what they want and they choose a sundress on a snow day, they also have to learn to accept the consequences of that choice. All you have to do is ask them, after they warmed up with some hot cocoa, what they thought of their clothing choice. Remember not to tell them what to think, but to ask what *they* think. They might decide that the consequences of being cold were acceptable to them. My other son wore only shorts for two solid years. We live in the mountains in Colorado, and it wasn't always easy to let him walk to the bus stop in his shorts and Converse tennis shoes. I had to learn not to bug him to take a coat or wear boots (he never did). I also told him he could not complain nor could he get special treatment (like a ride to school). If he was making the choice, he had to accept the consequences.

Learning how to take responsibility for your actions and choices requires:

- Being given opportunities to experience low-risk choices and consequences when young.
- Parents asking what their child thinks about what happened (instead of jumping in with the "right way" to have done it). This is called learning from our mistakes.
- Looking for opportunities (when watching a movie together for instance) to discuss how people do and do not take responsibility for their actions and choices. Be sure to share how you learned this skill in your life.

If children do not have the opportunity to be responsible for themselves for their choices, how will they learn to be responsible when their choices affect others? If they hit a car in the parking lot right after they have their driver's license, will they stop and leave a note on the car or just drive off because they don't know what to do? If they leave their coat at the football game, will they tell you, make it your problem, and expect you to pay for a new one?

Life Skill #3. Learning How to Problem Solve



When you know how to think for yourself and to take responsibility for your actions, then you are well on your way to learning how to problem solve. My daughter has a significant learning disability that often shows up as rigid thinking. She gets a picture in her head of how something is going to happen and gets stuck when things change. When she is stuck and crying, yelling, and slamming doors, she can't see a solution to her problem.

My approach to guiding her to being more flexible (and consider other options) is to talk to her before the problem actually arises. Whenever possible, we discuss her choices. I also set up little scenarios so she can practice. After she'd learned to place her own order at a food court counter, for example, I increased the demand and asked her to get me something, too. This meant she would have multiple items to get from the counter to our table. After she paid, she realized her dilemma; she just stood there for a moment and I could see her thinking. Normally she would get her drink filled first and then come to the table. That wasn't going to work this time. She made a decision, put the two empty cups inside each other and cradled the hot dogs as she proudly walked to our table. I practically had to bite my tongue to allow her to finish (she still needed to get the drinks and get the toppings on her hot dog). When we were happily munching, I praised each step she took to effectively solve her problem. It was not the only solution, but it was hers. Whenever I anticipate a problem, I remind her of the skills she practiced--and now, she often can find her own solution.

Learning to how effectively problem solve includes:

- Learning how to pause, get centered and relax so that you can look at options
- Considering more than one solution before taking action
- Nurturing creative thinking by playing games where there is no correct answer

If children are not given low-risk opportunities to solve their own problems, then they will miss an important skill that every adult needs, especially when the risks get much higher. Practice problem solving for scenarios big and small. Every middle school student needs to have options ready to go for when their best friend invites them over to drink beer when their parents are gone. And kids who struggle with getting homework done can learn how to find a



solution that works for them, such as dancing for one song every 20 minutes, or emailing their book report to their teacher so they don't have to remember to turn it in the next day.

Life Skill #4. Learning How to Negotiate Conflict

My son, like many of your children, would get angry to avoid conflict. It worked pretty well, as then we would focus on the angry behavior instead of the issue he was avoiding. He wasn't learning how to work through conflict; he was learning how to deflect it onto others. I reacted with anger when he started yelling, which didn't help. So at a certain point, I knew I had to be the first to stop, take some deep breaths, consider the situation and be honest about my own feelings. Many adults have not learned this skill (for proof, watch any reality show) and do not know how to accurately name our feelings, much less allow them to just be part of our experience.

Learning to negotiate conflict requires:

- Developing the capacity to stay calm and become aware of our emotions when in conflict
- Learning to recognize, accept and appropriately process our emotions
- Practice our problem solving skills to apply in these emotionally charged situations.

If children do not learn how to handle conflict in a safe, clear and honest way, they are at risk for creating dangerous and/or unhealthy situations. It may not seem as important when your 10-year-old son gets into a fight with his friend on the soccer field, but what about when he is 17 and wants his girlfriend to do more than kiss and she doesn't want to? If they can both negotiate that conflict, they are likely to make the right decisions for themselves (they may not be decisions we *like*, but remember, we want them to think for themselves).

Life Skill #5. Learning How to Make a Contribution

Think of the happiest people you know. I'll bet that a key to that happiness is that they have a way to make a contribution. A young child can give part of their allowance to protect the oceans. A tween might volunteer at the local Humane Society or food bank. A teenager might work for the summer with at-risk youth. And that child or teen might become a veterinarian or therapist  because they experienced the joy of making a meaningful contribution.

Learning to make a contribution includes:

- Cultivating compassion and empathy.
- Developing a willingness to take action and step in to help, support, guide and protect others.
- Understanding your own strengths, styles and skills so you can follow your passion out into the world.

If children do not learn to make a contribution, they are at great risk for a life of loneliness and isolation. Every person, no matter what their struggles are, deserves and needs to share their gifts, talents, skills, spirit and heart with the world. No matter how hard it is to parent a child with behavior issues, give them a chance to contribute. It can change the world.

If you need help navigating the challenging obstacles that come up as you raise your kids, remember that our 1-on-1 Coaching are here for you. They've helped thousands of families just like yours come up with sensible, effective solutions to tough parenting problems.

Subscribe to the Empowering Parents Podcast via Stitcher

Subscribe to the Empowering Parents Podcast via iTunes

Subscribe to the Empowering Parents Podcast via RSS

 About Anna Stewart, Family Advocate

Anna Stewart is a family advocate, writer, speaker, facilitator and single mother of 3 unique kids. She is passionate about helping families learn to advocate WITH their children and teens and supporting those with AD/HD. Anna is the author of School Support for Students with AD/HD. Visit her website and Facebook page here.

