

Smart but Helpless Kids: Can Your Child Make It in the Real World?

by Kim Abraham LMSW and Marney Studaker-Cordner LMSW



Some of the highest rated television series for adolescents and teens today focus on what would happen if society was suddenly thrown into the ultimate test for survival—like surviving the zombie apocalypse. How would you stay alive if you had to hunt and grow your own food, search for fresh sources of water and live without electricity, using only your wits and skills? The truth is most kids don't possess those extraordinary life skills, let alone the mundane ones we all need to make it in the real world—like balancing the checkbook.

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How many children today know how to patch holes in a pair of jeans or prepare a meal from scratch? In our world of instant gratification, it's so much quicker to run to the mall for a new pair of pants, microwave a frozen dinner or hit the drive thru, where your food is two minutes and 20 feet away.

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If your 10-year-old child or grandchild has ever shown you how to work your computer or phone, you know that the generation we are raising now is bright and full of promise. Their skillset is often based in technology. Don't get us wrong. Those are great, necessary skills to have in today's world. But what about those other skills? The ones that get us through power outages, budget crunches, stressful situations with people and daily tasks that require perseverance and problem solving? How can we strengthen this generation's foundation of life skills?

A Culture of Caretaking

Over the past several decades, our society has moved increasingly toward “doing for” our children rather than “teaching how.” Why? Well, to start with, because we can. In the “Old Days,” children played an essential role in the survival of the family. They helped farm the land, took care of the younger children, gathered eggs and prepared meals. Over time, a child’s role became less of contributor and more of receiver. Instead of earning material things once worked toward as a family (computers, televisions, phones), expensive items became Christmas and birthday gifts.

Schools began giving more and more homework, focused on the skills needed for today’s modern world (advanced math, computer science, communications) and there was a movement away from classes such as Home Economics and Family Life. Remember sewing pillows and measuring ingredients in Home Ec? Building bookcases in Woodshop class? Today’s 11-year-old is spending hours at night learning Algebra, something most of us didn’t encounter until high school.

Meanwhile, our culture focuses less and less on teaching our children the skills we all grew up learning. They simply don’t know how to do some of the things we ask of them. And let’s face it, sometimes after working 8-10 hours, it’s just easier to clean the bathroom ourselves rather than try to teach a 15-year-old who cries, “But I don’t know HOW to clean the toilet!”

Assess Your Child’s Skills: It’s Never Too Late to Learn – or to Teach

Do a quick mental assessment of your child’s basic life skill knowledge. There are no set rules on what a child of certain age “should” know. It’s a judgment call. As parents, we want to prepare our children for “the Real World.” Much of that world is dealing with technology; but much of it isn’t. To start, you can pick a skill you think your child would be interested in or good at. What are his strengths or things she enjoys? Or are there some skills you think would be valuable for your child to have, that he or she hasn’t learned yet? Doing laundry from start to finish (sorting whites from colors, measuring detergent, knowing what is washed in cold vs. hot)? Making a sandwich? Chopping vegetables for a salad? Working with a sibling to wash dishes? (This is also an opportunity to learn skills of cooperation and managing emotions such as frustration and irritability!) Shopping at the grocery store and staying within a budget? Using the post office to mail an actual letter? One mom we know expressed shock that her 23-year-old son had no idea how to make out an envelope: “He wasn’t sure where to put the address!”

Think about what’s reasonable for your child’s age and be careful not to underestimate their abilities. Are there things you’re doing *for* your child that he or she is capable of doing for themselves? If so, the next time your daughter needs to return some jeans at the mall, instead of taking them up to the sales clerk yourself, consider coaching her through it, from walking up to the counter to showing the receipt, to actually making sure she gets the correct amount of money back.

The Benefits of Skill Building with Children and Teens

Teaching the “how to” of life skills with your child not only helps with responsibilities at home. It helps your child in five ways:

1. **Increased capability.** The first obvious benefit in teaching your child life skills is in learning the task itself. It's much better for your son or daughter to learn skills over time than to try to cram in everything they need to know at the age of eighteen (or older) as they prepare to move out on their own (and they become overwhelmed).
2. **More confidence.** The more capable a child or teen is at completing tasks, the more confident he or she will feel in a variety of situations. For example, teaching your 7-year-old son to go up to the McDonald's counter and ask for ketchup (rather than expecting you to do it *for* him) can help him build confidence that he is capable of interacting with people in the public. Years later, he is unafraid to pick up the phone and order a pizza or call a business to inquire about their moving van rates. This may sound simple, but it's a great example of daily living skills, how they begin at a young age and can be generalized to a variety of situations. Many young adults we know experience anxiety about their abilities to talk to others effectively. They worry that they will look foolish or make a mistake. Anxiety can lead to procrastinating. A young adult is more likely to postpone applying for a job if he is nervous about the interview or insecure about his capabilities. Life skills training can positively impact his or her ability to apply online for a job or walk into a store to ask for an application.
3. **Strengthening the Parent-Child Relationship.** Teaching life skills is an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your child. It's time well spent and can lead to a stronger bond. You may remember learning a task as a child: baking cookies with your grandma; learning to fish with your grandfather; fixing a bicycle chain or changing a tire with your dad. Learning life skills doesn't have to be a "chore." It can be fun—an opportunity to spend time together, strengthening your bond through a shared experience.
4. **Recovering from Mistakes.** One of the greatest lessons we can pass on to our children is that we all make mistakes. Sometimes when we're baking those cookies, they burn. Sometimes when we're out fishing, we accidentally knock over the tackle box. Changing tires can be tricky and lug nuts get lost. Practicing life skills such as cleaning, fixing, building and cooking teaches us that sometimes we get it right the first time—and sometimes we don't. It teaches us to get back up and try again. It teaches us what to do *differently* the next time, so the dinner doesn't burn. Practicing life skills teaches us that mistakes are okay, even expected, when learning a new skill. Remember to be patient with your child. After all, it's the process of learning that's most valuable.
5. **Values...A Nice Side Effect.** As your child learns lifeskills such as cleaning a bedroom (cleaning it well—not just shoving everything under the bed or in the closet), he learns to value his possessions. He also learns the self-respect that comes with taking care of yourself and your things.

Skills that Make a Difference in the Real World

Let's face it. Your child may never acquire the life skills needed to vanquish zombies. But he can learn a wide range of skills that will make him more effective in daily life. Preparing our kids for life as adults can range from housecleaning, preparing food, learning to budget and operating appliances to more person-centered skills like negotiating with others, learning to

apologize, ordering meals in restaurants politely and showing respect to others in ways as basic as putting your cell phone away at dinner. By learning and mastering tasks, your child will gain a sense of confidence and capability that can last a lifetime.

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About Kim Abraham LMSW and Marney Studaker-Cordner LMSW



Kimberly Abraham, LMSW, has worked with children and families for more than 25 years. She specializes in working with teens with behavioral disorders, and has also raised a child with Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Marney Studaker-Cordner, LMSW, is the mother of four and has been a therapist for 15 years. She works with children and families and has in-depth training in the area of substance abuse. Kim and Marney are the co-creators of The ODD Lifeline for parents of Oppositional, Defiant kids, and Life Over the Influence, a program that helps families struggling with substance abuse issues. Their first children's book, *Daisy: The True Story of an Amazing 3-Legged Chinchilla*, teaches the value of embracing differences and was the winner of the 2014 National Indie Excellence Children's Storybook Cover Design Award.

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