

How to Raise a Problem-Solver

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We want kids to enter the real world as prepared and self-sufficient as possible. The road to this goal has one major rule: make sure you let them drive sometimes.

By JOANNA NESBIT

Last spring, when my high schooler drove to a friend's house for a study session, I didn't learn until later that the house was 25 miles away in an area he wasn't familiar with. He'd never pumped gas, and the tank was empty. Had I known any of these details beforehand, I would have offered lots of advice—but my not knowing turned out to be better for both of us. Somehow he navigated a busy gas station, prepaid with his debit card, pumped gas, and headed north on the freeway to hunt down the student's house. He was capable of figuring it out on his own, and he did just that.

It was a gratifying moment. We all like to imagine a world where our kids make smart choices when we aren't around. By the time they leave the nest to go to college, travel, or start a job, we want to feel confident they'll thrive. Unfortunately, many hiring managers today don't see as much problem-solving ability in their young employees as they'd like. "Young people's ability to get things done on their own and take initiative is one of the biggest employer concerns," says Ray Bixler, CEO of SkillSurvey, a cloud-based reference-checking service. "The word "confidence" is one we see often in areas of development." Of course, no one intentionally prevents their children from learning to solve problems. But today's parenting culture of leaning in to help kids get ahead can undercut their ability to develop the skills they need, says Julie Lythcott-Haims, former dean of freshmen at Stanford University and author of *Real American* and *How to Raise an Adult*. How can you give your kids space to figure out their stuff? For starters, don't view "giving space" as yet another task you do for your kids. It's about establishing a new mindset, not making life more complicated. A few ideas from the experts.

Make room for play.

Children learn critical skills through open-ended play. In their 2016 book, *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children*, university professors Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, PhD, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, PhD, contend that today's culture elevates "content" over play—in

other words, we want kids to soak up knowledge at all times. But free play teaches important skills, such as problem-solving, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, innovation, and confidence. “Play is really the crucible for developing these skills because in play kids don’t have to stick with the program,” says Golinkoff, professor of education at the University of Delaware in Newark. “They can violate the norms.” Structured activities are important, but kids also acquire essential skills from made-up games in the backyard. The best part about free play is that it’s, well, free. It only requires downtime—and all you have to do is get out of the way. For example, when your child is playing with a friend, don’t hover nearby to mediate disputes or correct their ideas—let them figure everything out, unless they really need you. And even if it makes you nervous, allow them to do some calculated risk-taking: Let them climb and use tools, with some supervision in the beginning. Taking reasonable risks (evaluating a challenge and deciding how to handle it) is now recognized as an important component of learning to problem-solve.

You can also create more opportunities for invention. Keep a box full of random loose parts and junk, like paper towel rolls and cardboard boxes, which make excellent fort-building materials.

Little kids, as self-centered as they may sometimes seem, actually want to be part of activities that benefit other people. They are motivated to help when they know the work they’re doing matters and the tasks are real (they can usually tell the difference between real-life and pretend scenarios), says Andrew Coppens, PhD, assistant professor of education in learning sciences at the University of New Hampshire in Durham. How we respond to their initial eagerness is crucial, he says: If you wait until your child can do a task independently, you may miss the sweet spot when she doesn’t see household tasks as drudgery and truly wants to participate. When Coppens and his colleagues researched Mexican-American families with indigenous Mexican heritage, they found that most of the kids voluntarily participated in household chores. Parents in these families look out for situations kids want to get involved in and give them age-appropriate tasks. So if your little one is watching Dad fold laundry, Dad can give him a pile of socks to sort. If your kid loves hanging out in the kitchen while you make dinner, ask him to stir a bowl of ingredients or measure out a cup of beans. At first it’s going to be messy, and it’ll probably make the job take longer, but think big picture: “Getting kids involved in work that’s needed and matters gives them a sense of purpose and teaches them to be truly helpful in regularly getting those things done,” says Coppens.

Ask questions

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Swooping in to fix a mistake—or handling a task from the beginning—is so easy. And you’ll do it better. But asking your child questions (in a neutral voice) when she’s facing a problem helps you pause long enough to avoid the swoop and gives her practice in decision-making. “If your fourth grader has left her backpack at school, you can say, “That must be frustrating,” and then you can ask, “What do you think you’re going to do about it?”” says Lythcott-Haims. “First offer empathy, then ask the question that tells your kid it’s not the parent’s problem to solve. You’re implying that you know your kid is capable of handling it.” Your child might flounder and say she doesn’t know. Keep asking questions (see “Questions That Keep You in the Passenger’s Seat,” opposite page). “But don’t take over, and don’t drop everything and go to the school to get the backpack,” says Lythcott-Haims. Occasionally, when a situation is high stakes, it’s appropriate to come to the rescue—say, if your kid uncharacteristically forgot a memory stick containing a PowerPoint presentation for a final grade. But a pattern of forgotten assignments or sports equipment doesn’t qualify. “We seem to treat everything as high stakes, which has the double consequence of raising anxiety in kids and depriving them of the chance to learn to do things for themselves,” says Lythcott-Haims. One reason we jump into action so instinctively: We often underestimate kids’ capabilities because kids develop so quickly, especially in the early years. If you think your child is too young to try something, ask yourself why, suggests Jennifer L.W. Fink, a mom of four sons and the founder of Building Boys, a blog focused on boys’ well-being. “Is it a cultural thing you’re carrying over? Is it because nobody else’s kid is doing it? Are you afraid other parents will judge you?” Consider the ways your child has already surprised you and how proud her progress has made you. Then remind yourself that stepping back is a form of helping too.

Let go of perfect.

In other words, prepare for bumps. When you introduce your kids to life skills—prepping food, doing laundry, heading to the dentist solo—expect a learning curve, says Lythcott-Haims. But your kids *will* become capable. Karen Schwartzkopf, a mom of three in Richmond, Virginia, asked her kids to handle one family dinner a week. “They could get help from each other but not from me,” she says. “One child’s first effort was a glob of sticky soba noodles that looked like a brain in a bowl.” But since then, all three have become excellent cooks.

The other trick is helping kids let go of perfect too, which can be difficult in high-achieving schools or communities. Suniya Luthar, PhD, a psychology professor at Arizona State University in Tempe who researches high-achieving schools around the country, says the teens she studies feel an intense pressure to excel. “These kids need to know they’re loved by the adults around them for who they are, not for what they do,” she says. But even if you’re not prone to anxiety about GPAs and colleges, counterbalancing the influence from school isn’t easy. Try to limit

“transactional” conversations about grades and tests, says Lythcott-Haims. Practice this speech: “There are lots of great colleges. No point stressing about getting into the small handful that deny almost everyone. Life is about so much more than that.” The irony, of course, is that today’s climate of more activities, more academics, and more supervision means there’s less room for learning independent problem-solving, stick-to-itiveness, and teamwork, the very things that help kids do well at college and beyond. Rest assured that letting kids play, help out at home, and handle their own issues helps them build the confidence they need for life. And if they just can’t figure out how to open the cap on the gas tank, you’re still only a phone call away.

Questions That Keep You in the Passenger’s Seat

When kids come to you for help, resist the urge to take over. Eileen Kennedy-Moore, PhD, a psychologist in Princeton, New Jersey, and coauthor of *Growing Friendships: A Kids’ Guide to Making and Keeping Friends*, suggests asking questions like these to guide them toward a solution. Keep your tone kind, calm, and curious.

- What do you think you/we could do to solve this? (if your child offers an unreasonable suggestion, ask, “What else could you/we do?”)
- What could you do to help them feel better?
- What’s your plan for getting this done?
- How is that strategy working?
- What has happened when you’ve tried doing that in the past?
- What might get in the way of this plan?
- What do you want to do differently next time?