

Mind in the Making Tips for Parents



By Ellen Galinsky

For the past two decades, parents have felt ever-increasing pressure to buy expensive, high-tech learning toys and enroll their children in special activities that will give them an edge in getting into a good college and embarking on a rewarding career. Yet employers overwhelmingly report that young employees are not prepared for the demands of the 21st-century workplace. Specifically, they complain that the kind of skills successful workers need are typically not taught in school nor tested for — skills such as communicating effectively, working well with diverse groups of people, thinking outside the box, and being ongoing learners.

All these skills involve enhancing the “executive functions” of the brain—the brain functions we use to manage our attention, our emotions, and our behavior in pursuit of our goals. And none of them requires expensive equipment, coaches, or tutors. Here is a list of the seven life skills and a few research-based tips for fostering them that professionals can pass on to parents.

1. FOCUS AND SELF CONTROL

Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload. Focus and self control involve paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly, and exercising self control.

Tip for Parents: Play a simple game like “Simon Says” with your preschooler. Your child has to remember to pay attention, and *not* to do what you say unless you say “Simon Says.” You can also create a more difficult game that helps children learn to exercise self control by asking them to do the opposite of what you are doing – for example, if you clap once, they clap twice, if you clap twice, they clap once.

2. PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Perspective goes far beyond empathy: it involves figuring out what others think and feel, and forms the basis of children understanding their parents’ and teachers’ intentions. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Tip for Parents: We all know that we should read to our children, but it is *how* we read that matters most. Ask children to think about the perspectives of the characters in their books – why do they think that person acted a certain way and what must he or she have been thinking or feeling?

3. COMMUNICATING

Communication is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing – it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

Tip for Parents: Engage your children in conversations that extend and elaborate their past experiences by asking “wh” questions: why, what, where or who. For example, after a trip to the zoo, ask “What animals did you see?” Then repeat back what the child says (“You saw a lion!”), thus encouraging the child to say more.

4. MAKING CONNECTIONS

Making connections is at the core of learning: Being able to identify what’s the same and what’s different in disparate pieces of information or experiences, or to transfer something learned in one area of life to another one is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see the connections who will succeed.

Tip for Parents: Play sorting games with your child. Tear out pictures from magazines and ask them to put all pictures of the animals in one pile. Then change the rules and ask them to put all of the pictures that have yellow in them in a pile.

5. CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions, and actions.

Tip for Parents: Promote children’s curiosity – if they are wondering about something, help think of an experiment where they can figure it out for themselves, such as why do different things float in water. With older children, help them evaluate ads on television, asking them if they think a claim an advertisement is true and how they would find out.

6. TAKING ON CHALLENGES

Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them) do better in school and in life.

Tip for Parents: Instead of praising children’s personalities (“you are so smart” or “athletic”), praise their efforts or strategies (“you worked hard to find the right piece of the puzzle”). Studies have found that this kind of praise encourages children to challenge themselves, while the more global forms of praise actually have the opposite effect, dampening a child’s initiative and interest in learning.

7. SELF-DIRECTED, ENGAGED LEARNING

It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live – as long as we learn.

Tip for Parents: Help your child make plans – whether it’s what they want to play with next, what to do on a rainy Saturday, or how they are going to tackle a homework assignment. Then ask your child to evaluate those plans – how did they work out and what might they change next time? This helps children take responsibility for what they do and what they are learning.

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