

Proactive Parenting February 2016

"Readiness"; Kindergarten to College/Work

Whether you are signing your young child up for kindergarten or anxiously awaiting decisions about college or work after high school, parents everywhere are increasingly concerned and anxious about the "readiness" of their child to take these next big steps. So many of the skills that will help a child successfully navigate the brave new world of kindergarten are the very same ones, albeit on deeper and broader levels, that children will need to leave home and meet the new adventure of college or work life. The process of helping children develop these skills starts when they are very young and continues to build throughout life. Children don't need to be completely capable and confident entering kindergarten, but they do need exposure and practice with some essential skills so they possess a foundation from which to build. The more independent and resilient they are the more equipped they will be to handle change, take on new challenges, and problem solve. Ideally all children will carry with them the security blanket of being emotionally grounded and supported by their parent's unconditional love, and we all hope they will be met by adults who will embrace their individuality, and support and challenge them in ways that will help them grow and learn, no matter where they are on their developmental journey.

In the second edition of the book; "Beyond Behavior Management", mental health specialist and early childhood consultant, Jenna Bilmes, lays out the six life skills children need to thrive in today's world. . They are: Attachment, Belonging, Self-Regulation, Initiative/Collaboration, Adaptability/Problem Solving, and Contribution/Respect. Attachment is perhaps the most obvious and essential. Children need at least one grown-up who cherishes them, believes in them, and will keep them safe. This is the basis for developing trust with all other adults, teachers, counselors, professors, bosses, friends, partners, etc. Belonging encompasses a myriad of emotional and social skills that help your child function in social groups, in and outside the classroom, and build and sustain friendships. This is true in a kindergarten classroom or dormitory full of new faces. We now know from brain research that Self-regulation is an essential for children of all ages to be able to focus and attend on learning tasks. The ability to manage strong emotions and control one's behavior is as important at eighteen as it is at five. Children, who become so frustrated or overwhelmed that they often head into downward negative spirals, have a harder time approaching new challenges. Emotional regulation is so important because being able to embrace new challenges with some semblance of confidence combined with the ability to work with others, helps children develop a healthy sense of Initiative and Collaboration. So much of learning K-12 and beyond happens in small and large social groups. More businesses have gone to "open floor plans" that encourage collaboration and group problem solving in the hopes of spurring creativity and innovation. The notion is to foster the mind set that; "I am constantly growing and changing and learning new things" (Jenna Bilmes).

Parents and teachers can also help children continually practice skills of Problem-Solving and Adaptability. These can be applied to social conflicts, difficult homework assignments, long term projects, or learning to put on winter gear, zipper a coat, or pack up a lunch box. They involve being flexible enough to adapt to a variety of social and educational landscapes, and helping children identify and tackle problems. Steps include: helping children break challenges into manageable parts, suggesting strategies, helping them develop a plan, "testing out" their plan, revising it as needed, and building a rolodex of approaches that propel them forward to a solution. We can teach kids to cue into a rising sense of being frustrated or overwhelmed, manage these emotions, and know when to ask for help so they become proactive rather than reactive. This same process is exactly what older children and young adults need to do as they problem solve complex issues: reflect on their own emotions and desires, listen to and take another person's perspective, and work to find a solution and/or compromise. Practicing from an early age to tackle challenges in small bites, be comfortable with making mistakes, learn from them and move on to try another approach, are vital skills to have throughout life. Practice with regulation and persistence with problem solving helps develop resilience and the ability to take on healthy risks (more specific examples of how to help children build these skills next month).

The frosting on this elaborate cake comes when children feel capable and confident enough to demonstrate Respect for themselves and others and use all these skills to Contribute to their "new world", be it the kindergarten classroom, the college lecture hall, job site, or beyond. It's a long and bumpy journey at times, but one of the best quotes to keep in mind as you help your child develop and practice all these essential skills comes from James Joyce; "Mistakes are the portals of discovery". Equipped with this foundation you can send them, whatever the age, out into the world, ready to discover all that is possible inside them and all around them in their brave new worlds.

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