

9 Essential Skills Kids Should Learn

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Kids in today's school system are not being prepared well for tomorrow's world.

As someone who went from the corporate world and then the government world to the ever-changing online world, I know how the world of yesterday is rapidly becoming irrelevant. I was trained in the newspaper industry, where we all believed we would be relevant forever — and I now believe will go the way of the horse and buggy.

Unfortunately, I was educated in a school system that believed the world in which it existed would remain essentially the same, with minor changes in fashion. We were trained with a skill set that was based on what jobs were most in demand in the 1980s, not what might happen in the 2000s.

And that kinda makes sense, given that no one could really know what life would be like 20 years from now. Imagine the 1980s, when personal computers were still fairly young, when faxes were the cutting-edge communication technology, when the Internet as we now know it was only the dream of sci-fi writers like William Gibson.

We had no idea what the world had in store for us.

And here's the thing: we still don't. We never do. We have never been good at predicting the future, and so raising and educating our kids as if we have any idea what the future will hold is not the smartest notion.

How then to prepare our kids for a world that is unpredictable, unknown? By teaching them to adapt, to deal with change, to be prepared for anything by not preparing them for anything specific.

This requires an entirely different approach to child-rearing and education. It means leaving our old ideas at the door, and reinventing everything.

My drop-dead gorgeous wife Eva (yes, I'm a very lucky man) and I are among those already doing this. We homeschool our kids — more accurately, we unschool them. We are teaching them to learn on their own, without us handing knowledge down to them and testing them on that knowledge.

It is, admittedly, a wild frontier, and most of us who are experimenting with unschooling will admit that we don't have all the answers, that there is no set of "best practices". But we also know that we are learning along with our kids, and that not knowing can be a good thing — an opportunity to find out, without relying on established methods that might not be optimal.

I won't go too far into methods here, as I find them to be less important than ideas. Once you have some interesting ideas to test, you can figure out an unlimited amount of methods, and so my dictating methods would be too restrictive.

Instead, let's look at a good set of essential skills that I believe children should learn, that will best prepare them for any world of the future. I base these on what I have learned in three different industries, especially the world of online entrepreneurship, online publishing, online living ... and more importantly, what I have learned about learning and working and living in a world that will never stop changing.

1. Asking questions. What we want most for our kids, as learners, is to be able to learn on their own. To teach themselves anything. Because if they can, then we don't need to teach them everything — whatever they need to learn in the future, they can do on their own. The first step in learning to teach yourself anything is learning to ask questions. Luckily, kids do this naturally — our hope is to simply encourage it. A great way to do this is by modeling it. When you and your child encounter something new, ask questions, and explore the possible answers with your child. When he does ask questions, reward the child instead of punishing him (you might be surprised how many adults discourage questioning).

2. Solving problems. If a child can solve problems, she can do any job. A new job might be intimidating to any of us, but really it's just another problem to be solved. A new skill, a new environment, a new need ... they're all simply problems to be solved. Teach your child to solve problems by modeling simple problem solving, then allowing her to do some very easy ones on her own. Don't immediately solve all your child's problems — let her fiddle with them and try various possible solutions, and reward such efforts. Eventually, your child will develop confidence in her problem-solving abilities, and then there is nothing she can't do.

3. Tackling projects. As an online entrepreneur, I know that my work is a series of projects, sometimes related, sometimes small and sometimes large (which are usually a group of smaller projects). I also know that there isn't a project I can't tackle, because I've done so many of them. This post is a project. Writing a book is a project. Selling the book is another project. Work on projects with your kid, letting him see how it's done by working with you, then letting him do more and more by himself. As he gains confidence, let him tackle more on his own. Soon, his learning will just be a series of projects that he's excited about.

4. Finding passion. What drives me is not goals, not discipline, not external motivation, not reward ... but passion. When I'm so excited that I can't stop thinking about something, I will inevitably dive into it fully committed, and most times I'll complete the project and love doing it. Help your kid find things she's passionate about — it's a matter of trying a bunch of things, finding ones that excite her the most, helping her really enjoy them. Don't discourage any interest — encourage them. Don't suck the fun out of them either — make them rewarding.

5. Independence. Kids should be taught to increasingly stand on their own. A little at a time, of course. Slowly encourage them to do things on their own. Teach them how to do it, model it, help them do it, help less, then let them make their own mistakes. Give them confidence in themselves by letting them have a bunch of successes, and letting them solve the failures. Once they learn to be independent, they learn that they don't need a teacher, a parent, or a boss to tell them what to do. They can manage themselves, and be free, and figure out the direction they need to take on their own.

6. Being happy on their own. Too many of us parents coddle our kids, keeping them on a leash, making them rely on our presence for happiness. When the kid grows up, he doesn't know how to be happy. He must immediately attach to a girlfriend or friends. Failing that, they find happiness in other external things — shopping, food, video games, the Internet. But if a child learns from an early age that he can be happy by himself, playing and reading and imagining, he has one of the most valuable skills there is. Allow your kids to be alone from an early age. Give them privacy, have times (such as the evening) when parents and kids have alone time.

7. Compassion. One of the most essential skills ever. We need this to work well with others, to care for people other than ourselves, to be happy by making others happy. Modeling compassion is the key. Be compassionate to your child at all times, and to others. Show them empathy by asking how they think others might feel, and thinking aloud about how you think others might feel. Demonstrate at every opportunity how to ease the suffering of others when you're able, how to make others happier with small kindnesses, how that can make you happier in return.

8. Tolerance. Too often we grow up in an insulated area, where people are mostly alike (at least in appearance), and when we come into contact with people who are different, it can be uncomfortable, shocking, fear-inducing. Expose your kids to people of all kinds, from different races to different sexuality to different mental conditions. Show them that not only is it OK to be different, but that differences should be celebrated, and that variety is what makes life so beautiful.

9. Dealing with change. I believe this will be one of the most essential skills as our kids grow up, as the world is always changing and being able to accept the change, to deal with the change, to navigate the flow of change, will be a competitive advantage. This is a skill I'm still learning myself, but I find that it helps me tremendously, especially compared to those who resist and fear change, who set goals and plans and try to rigidly adhere to them as I adapt to the changing landscape. Rigidity is less helpful in a changing environment than flexibility, fluidity, flow. Again, modeling this skill for your child at every opportunity is important, and showing them that

changes are OK, that you can adapt, that you can embrace new opportunities that weren't there before, should be a priority. Life is an adventure, and things will go wrong, turn out differently than you expected, and break whatever plans you made — and that's part of the excitement of it all.

We can't give our children a set of data to learn, a career to prepare for, when we don't know what the future will bring. But we can prepare them to adapt to anything, to learn anything, to solve anything, and in about 20 years, to thank us for it.

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