



Raising Confident & Independent Lifelong Learners

What Are Our Goals for Our Children?

With our children at home during the pandemic shutdowns, it has become clearer than ever that they are lacking in some essential learning and life skills. It is critical that we help our children become confident and independent lifelong learners so that they can grow into competent and conscious leaders. We just need to take deliberate (but simple!) actions to teach them the skills to be better learners, workers, leaders, and humans; these skills range from internal self-awareness to daily techniques to external community action. In altering the ways we communicate and interact with our children, we will see that their mindset, motivations, and behaviors will consequently change. This will make school (and life!) so much more management for them (and you!). Just remember: "Small changes lead to BIG changes."

What are the Skills Our Children Need to Acquire?

METACOGNITION:

Metacognition is simply thinking about one's thinking. This involves assessing variables in personal knowledge, the task at hand, and the strategies for completion. Children should learn metacognition to better plan, monitor, and gauge their understanding and performance.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS:

Executive Functions involve the skills to manage daily life, such as working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. Children with good executive functioning are better able to focus, follow directions, organize, and handle emotions.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS:

Interpersonal Skills are the non-technical personal attributes and skills needed for success in school and work. These "soft skills" help children to better interact with their peers, creatively solve problems, and make changes in their world and the world around them.

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How Can We Teach These Skills to Our Children?

Self-Awareness and Emotional Self-Regulation

- **Start with gratitude.** Begin every day with each person sharing their “Good Things”: a few things that are good today, this week, in life, etc. Gratitude helps with self-control and motivation.
- **Model vulnerability.** Share something about yourself to get your children to open up. Talk about a struggle you have had or something that has challenged you. Children often view adults as perfect and invincible beings, but it is good for them to see that all humans face difficulties at times.
- **Don’t bury emotions.** Help your children recognize and identify emotions. For example, if they experience butterflies in their stomachs before reading out loud, explain that it means they’re nervous. Utilize the “Name it, Claim it, Reclaim/Tame/Aim it” method: 1) Identify and label the feeling, 2) Take ownership of the feeling (i.e. “I’m feeling ___”), and 3) Come up with healthy, realistic ways to handle the feeling. Supplementary resources may help, such as [My Feelings Journal](#) (ages 4-7), [Big Life Journal](#) (ages 6-11), [I am, I can](#) (ages 7-9), [My Mixed Emotions](#) (ages 7-10), [Happy Confident Me](#) (ages 7-12) or [social-emotional worksheets](#), and apps, like those listed [here](#).
- **Pause for emotions.** Include moments to stop and recognize what is causing them stress and what is producing confidence. Have an open discussion about them and brainstorm appropriate reactions to these emotions.
- **Encourage self-talk.** Have your children talk themselves through the steps of a difficult activity or periodically pause for a mental (or, if it is while you are helping them, verbal) play-by-play narrative of what’s happening. Self-talk can help them identify potentially problematic thinking and behavior patterns that ought to be addressed, such as self-doubts, shoulds, and fear of failure.
- **Don’t go into Fix-It Mode.** If your child is frustrated, lead with listening and seek to understand through open-ended questioning. Patiently and lovingly check in at intervals and ask how he/she is doing, rather than automatically coaching him/her through it or telling him/her to calm down. This helps children grapple with their emotions on their own, feeling your support while they do so.
- **Be proactive.** Brainstorm and develop stress management techniques with them in advance. You can suggest that they exercise, use a sensory tool (stress balls, fidget spinners, etc.), do a quick yoga session, take a hot bath/shower, journal, craft, draw, take deep breaths (try “[Square Breathing](#)”), listen to music, watch 5 minutes of funny videos, or say/think positive affirmations.
- **Explore human motivations for behaviors.** Encourage your children to hypothesize about others’ motivations and consider alternatives. For instance, if your child is upset that someone bumped into him/her, ask “Why do you think he/she did that? Can you think of another explanation?” Maybe you can remind them of a time they were on the other side of the situation and discuss their reasons for their actions. You can also use literature and history to explore human motivation and behavior. Then ask your children to consider their own motives for certain similar behaviors and the resulting impact on others.

Growth Mindset and Goal Setting

- **Acknowledge “Glows and Grows.”** Recognize and describe strengths and needs. Have your children reflect on what they do well and what they struggle with, not just in academics but in all areas of their lives. You may need to model this for them at first, such as “You seem to remember best when you see the info.” Gently remind them that setbacks can actually provide a way forward.
- **Praise effort.** Promote your children’s effort rather than talent. For instance, praise how they approached the challenge and how hard they worked, not just their grades and scores. This helps to build their innate self of self-worth.
- **Consider the “why.”** Ask your children to consider *why* they are asked to do certain tasks and *how* they matter. This is an especially relevant discussion in regards to homework. Consider non-obvious reasons as well. For instance, completing a math assignment is not just for getting a good grade, but it is also teaching problem-solving skills which are valuable in life as well as giving them a chance to practice carrying out a task through to completion.
- **Set goals.** Ask your children to develop their own action plan for improvement. This puts them in charge of developing their own skills and abilities. Identify short- and long-term goals: specific things they want to accomplish that are meaningful to them. Suggest starting with something that is fairly simple and achievable, like saving money, before moving on to longer-term goals, like buying a car. Suggest they write down the big-picture goals where it can be easily referenced while they are working. Have them think about what has to be done to achieve them. “What skills need to be learned? What are some problems that might arise?” Celebrate when intermediate steps are accomplished; don’t wait until the end to give praise. Then later reflect on why they did or did not meet those goals. This encourages them to think deeply about their behaviors and abilities. You can use templates/worksheets to organize (like [general](#) and [SMART](#)) or apps like [GoalsOnTrack](#), [Toodeledo](#), or [Habit List](#).
- **Inspire growth.** Add the word “yet” to statements about their challenges. For example, instead of “I can’t do it,” encourage them to say “I can’t do it YET.” And use the words “when” or “since” instead of “if.” For instance, instead of “If you can be anything you want...” say “SINCE you can be anything you want.” Also encourage the use of positive affirmations. For example, “I WILL get an A on my test tomorrow” or “I AM smart and capable.”

Organization and Focus

- **Establish a clear plan.** Put the daily/weekly schedule on a white board. Block off times for work and school meetings first, then add in time blocks for exercising, eating, relaxing, and fun (baking, games, swimming, crafts). When possible, add in “cushion time” for transitions that you know can sometimes be challenging, like leaving the house or getting ready for bed. The key is not the specific schedule, it’s just having one. You can flex as needed if something major comes up, but with this in place, you will all know what your days will generally look like. Consider referencing [homeschool scheduling suggestions](#). You can also write on

the whiteboard a task list for each child each day with categories like: Learning, Self (meditation, journaling, etc.), Exercise (biking, running, etc.), Chores, Music, Create, Connect (with someone outside of the house). Set minimum time limits for each. Have each child check off the tasks as they complete them in any order they want. This allows them autonomy and ownership.

- **Have an organized setup.** Establish a designated workspace free of distractions and with all needed supplies readily accessible in a [desk organizer](#). Help your children organize papers so they are easy to find by using color-coded tabs or folders. Show them how to take neat and organized notes. You may want to even suggest they experiment with different pens (like maybe gel pens or wooden pencils) and notebooks (like flat open or composition notebooks).
- **Make organization a routine.** Every day right after school have your children go through this [daily routine](#) checklist to organize backpacks and binders. Also, regularly remove clutter and distractions from the designated study space.
- **Adapt to their needs.** Remember the basics: food, water, rest, sunshine, exercise, affection. Encourage them to get adequate sleep and nutrition. Be explicit and clear about the plan and expectations. Breakdown instructions with frequent checks for understanding. For especially fidgety children, you can shift direction every 20-30 minutes. Include a “Mindful Minute” after 30 minutes of focused attention for the children to stretch, move, quietly reflect, or talk with you about something on their mind.
- **Be proactive.** Removing “distractions” may include having them turn off notifications on electronics. You can use the [StayFocusd](#) Chrome extension or any of the digital detox apps discussed [here](#). Also have your children brainstorm ways to refocus on the task when they become distracted. Use positive reinforcement for staying focused, such as stickers, a fun timed break to watch a video, or time to just talk to you 1-on-1.

Planning, Prioritizing, and Time Management

- **Empower them.** Encourage your children to visualize success in a specific task and what that feels like. Have them talk themselves through and write down the exact steps needed to achieve it. Practice this with familiar, everyday tasks like getting ready for school in a more efficient manner.
- **Model it.** Show your children *how* to use checklists and calendars/planners by utilizing yours as an example. Then help them set up their own systems based on their personal preferences (a tangible item, like the [Passion Planner](#) and [Bulletproof Planner](#), or a virtual tool, like [Kidgy](#) and [Todist](#)).
- **Plan out the day.** Set a routine they can stick to. The daily routine should include time for homework, study breaks, and any other activities. Children should stick to a bedtime and wake up routine and start their homework at the same time every day. You can use a [15-minute daily planner](#) to list tasks, predict how long they will each take, prioritize them, and form a specific plan. By allowing children to choose the order of priority based on whatever criteria they want, it gives them more ownership. Making a plan also helps to avoid multitasking, which just saps attention and impedes performance.

- **Break down big tasks.** Guide your children through the following steps for big tasks: 1) Figure out how much time your child has until the deadline, 2) Estimate how long the task will take, 3) Decide how long your child can work at each sitting, 4) Write down each task and put them in order, assigning a deadline for each task, 5) Make a list of materials needed and gather them in advance, 6) Check in regularly to assess progress. Remember to recognize and celebrate the completion of each step. You can track all this using [Trello](#).
- **Use timing tools.** Have your children use clocks to see how much time has passed, how much is left, and how quickly it's passing. You can also set a timer to go off periodically as a reminder to check on if they are paying attention and understanding. Try a [Pomodoro Timer](#) (25 minutes of work, 5 minutes of break), the [Flora app](#) (a gamified Pomodoro Timer), or the [Focus ToDo app](#) (combines the pomodoro technique and task list). However, avoid using timers to rush them; set goals for thoroughness and accuracy rather than speed.
- **Encourage self-monitoring.** Remind your children to periodically monitor their behavior and consider whether they are doing the things they planned and whether these plans are achieving the goals they identified. They can ask themselves: "Is this part of the plan? If not, why am I doing it? Has something changed?" This can help them identify counter-productive habitual and impulsive actions and maintain focused attention and conscious control.

Monitoring Struggles and Mistakes, Evaluating Task Completion and Success, and Building Resilience

- **Inspire them to be proactive.** Tell your children that you believe they can find ways to fix mistakes. Give them praise when they notice mistakes in their work and make edits/changes on their own. Talk about next steps and what they learned from the experience. At the end, kindly ask them "What was confusing?" or "What was difficult?" This helps them view confusion and struggle as an integral part of growth and learning.
- **Praise their effort.** Remember to also celebrate the process, rather than just the end result. This shows your children that getting stuck, asking for help, and trying new strategies are important.
- **Evaluate successes.** Give your children opportunities to look back at what they've already achieved, including small steps they may not have even realized were accomplishments. Celebrate achievements big and small. After completing a task, have them reflect on what did and did not work well. Together, develop a list of things that supported focused and sustained attention as well as good organization and memory. Make sure those supports are in place for future tasks.
- **Use failure as a lesson.** Have your children think about what was learned from tasks that were not completed well. Ask them questions like: "Was it due to lack of information, a need to improve certain skills, bad time management, etc.? What would you do differently next time?" Help them recognize that an experience - particularly a failure - can offer lessons, and need not be interpreted as a final judgement on one's abilities.

Curiosity, Critical Thinking, and Creative Problem Solving

- **Spark their curiosity.** Introduce ways your children to pursue passions and discover new skills/strengths. Maybe use online tools to explore new topics in areas they are interested in, such as [Mix](#), [Discuver](#), or [URL Roulette](#).
- **Model open-mindedness.** Show your children how to respectfully challenge ideas, explore skepticism, and present counter arguments. Inspire them to ask questions they don't know the answers to, then form a hypothesis. Encourage dissenting views by allowing them to make up their own minds about important topics. When they want to share their ideas, listen and ask questions.
- **Make learning relevant.** Connect what your children are learning to things they are interested in, then introduce ways for them to pursue passions and discover new strengths. Reward them when they make meaningful connections between something they've learned in school and something else in their world.
- **Empower them to work through challenges.** Ask your children to come up with strategies for overcoming challenges. Guide them with questions that encourage them to analyze the situation and available options. Examine the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution together. Remind them that they have choices. Require students to utilize all available resources (textbooks, notes, internet searches, on-campus resources, teachers, etc.) before asking for your help. Some of our favorite resources are: YouTube, Khan Academy, [ck-12.org](#), [Seneca Learning](#), [ixl.com](#), [BrainPOP](#), and [Wolfram Alpha](#)

Advocacy and Collaboration

- **Ask for their input.** Ask them to tell you what they want or need, which encourages and demonstrates the power of language as a problem-solving tool. For example, once a week ask your children to give one positive comment and one potential improvement about something taking place in the home. Then put the changes into effect. This helps them feel that their opinions are valued.
- **Empower them to “Be the Change.”** Discuss ways with your children that they can change the family's, their school's, or the community's culture by being leaders. For example, they can help their younger sibling with reading or raise environmental awareness in their neighborhood. Help older children identify concrete actions they can take to improve large social issues by utilizing resources such as [GamesForChange](#), [DoSomething](#), and [VolunteerMatch](#).
- **Steer them away from fighting/avoidance to compromise and collaboration.** Encourage them to take these steps of conflict resolution: 1) Take an objective view of what happened. Try standing in the other person's shoes; 2) Face their mixed feelings of shame, fear, pride, worry, etc.; 3) List the reasons they need to resolve this; 4) Determine what is needed to move forward in a positive direction and make a plan; 5) Try to talk to the other person face-to-face or on the phone; 6) Make the apology and plan for moving forward simple and to the point; 7) Give the other person time to respond; 8) Back up words with actions; 9) Learn from what happened.

What's the Big Picture?

With these simple changes to the way we communicate and interact with our children, we are helping them to form an innate sense of self-worth, develop resilience and pride, find their unique voice, explore their personal interests, develop their distinct attributes, take risks in their learning, and – *the cherry on top* - enjoy learning!

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