

_BEHAVIOR AND LIFE SKILLS

Stop Doing Everything for Your Kids and Set Them on the Path to Independence

BY
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Imagine spending all this time and energy raising your kids, and then when you send them off to college someday, you still have to call to wake them up every morning to make sure they get to class on time. Sounds shocking, right? When I was in college 20 years ago, I can recall going multiple days, maybe even up to a couple of weeks, without communicating with my parents. Sure, this was before cell phones, text messaging, and Facebook, but it just wasn't necessary to talk to my parents that often. They gave me plenty of freedom to live my own life and to explore and grow during those incredible years as I blossomed into an independent adult. Somehow, I figured out how to register for classes, study, eat, do laundry, meet new friends, get over break ups, and handle bad grades all on my own.

Nowadays high school graduates enter college as children, incapable of taking care of themselves. According to Julie Lythcott-Haims, author of "How To Raise An Adult" who recently spoke at my children's school, over-parenting and prolonged childhood are an epidemic in this country. As the Dean of Freshman at Stanford University (one of best universities in the world) for 10 years, Julie Lythcott-Haims witnessed firsthand some disturbing trends of college students. Although they were more successful on paper than ever before, with pages of accolades like awards, high test scores, leadership roles, varsity letters, overseas experiences, unique community service projects, etc., these students were also less familiar with who they were, and their own goals and dreams. So many of them appeared to be robot-like, blindly following the directions of their parents to participate in certain activities and take classes that would land them acceptance letters from the finest institutions possible.

She also noticed that these kids couldn't do much for themselves, and still relied on mom and dad to help them. They were constantly on the phone with their parents asking for advice, and requesting that they take care of basic tasks like registering them for classes, sending them special packages, advising them on their homework, and even contacting professors if they did not receive the perfect grade.

How on earth will these young adults ever hold a job and function in the real world if they can't take care of themselves during college? We hear a lot about how millennials are difficult to work with in the job market – self-entitled, narcissistic, lazy, and tough to manage.

Lythcott-Haims makes it very clear: we have no one to blame but ourselves. The patterns that lead to this detrimental behavior start right now, even if your kids are in Kindergarten. Are you one of these types of parents?

- Overprotective. You view the world as unsafe, scary, and unpredictable so you do everything possible to protect your children instead of preparing them to learn how to handle life's challenges themselves.
- Tiger parent. You provide fierce direction to your kid, telling them that you know what's best for them to achieve success in this world.
- Excessive hand holder. You do everything for your kids to make life as pleasant as possible for them. You are their concierge, chauffeur, handler, scheduler, and secretary.

These helicopter parenting styles are impeding our children. So my parents today feel like their kids can't be successful without them helping at everyone turn and hovering over them. They spend so much time planning, protecting, directing, and nagging that they are ultimately stunting their growth. We are taking away the ability for our children to learn self-efficacy, says Lythcott-Haims. This incredibly important skill is a fundamental aspect of the human psyche. It is when individuals realize that their own actions lead to outcomes, that they have power to direct their own lives. According to Lythcott-Haims:

“If our children are to build self efficacy, then they need to do more of the thinking, planning, deciding, hoping, coping, trial and error, dreaming, and experiencing of life for themselves. We may ensure some short-term goals by over helping, but it comes as a long-term cost to their sense of self. We should be more concerned that they have the habits, skill set, mindset, and wellness to be successful no matter what their future holds.”

This all scares me because I want my children to be able to function without me, to fulfill their dreams and live happy, healthy, successful lives. Listening to her presentation really opened my eyes. And soon after hearing the stories about kids relying so much on their parents for everything, I had the opportunity to put this advice into practice.

My fourth grader came home one day with two grades that he was unhappy about. He was sure that they were marked incorrectly. He lost five points on a map assignment that his teacher said was missing a scale, but he was certain that he had included it on his map. On the other assignment, it appeared that the teacher forgot to include two additional books that he read. My son was upset about the grades, but did not think he could do anything about it. My first instinct was to grab my phone and email these teachers right away to explain their clear grading mistakes.

But then I stopped myself as I remembered what Julie Lythcott-Haims discussed. My son needed to learn how to speak to his teachers all by himself without me holding his hand. At first, he resisted and said he wasn't allowed to question a teacher. I explained the importance of speaking up, as long as he is polite and respectful. I had a long talk with him and gave him pointers for how to approach his teachers.

He came home the next day with a big smile on his face. It turned out that he was right about both assignments, and the teachers apologized for their errors and adjusted his grades. I was so proud of my son for handling this himself, and so proud of myself for realizing at this stage in the game that it is more important for me to teach him the skills he needs to take care of himself than me always protecting him.

So, how can stop doing everything for our kids? Here are some steps to get started on this whole new parenting perspective.

Stop making everything about you

Many parents try to live through their children because they are unsatisfied with their own childhood. They may even refer to their child's grades and activities as "ours." Learn to separate what's yours from what's theirs. We also have to stop trying to mold our kids into something they are not. We will all be much better off if we love our children for who they are and support them.

Teach them new skills

The only way our children will learn to do things for themselves is if we provide opportunities for them to learn new skills. This starts during pre-school when we ask our children to dress themselves and use a fork properly. With each new year, there are so many chances to help develop their skill set. The best way to teach our kids a new skill is to:

- Do it for them
- Do it with them
- Watch them do it on their own
- Let them do it on their own

I would rather gradually teach my kids and not have to cram everything in on the way to college move in day!

Let them fend for themselves and learn from their mistakes

As I demonstrated with the story about my son's grades, it is so important that our children learn how to speak up for themselves and communicate with authority figures and peers alike. We have to stop trying to clean up all their messes for them and protect them from failure. The only way they will grow is if they make mistakes and learn how to handle them. I am so proud of my son for addressing his grading issue on his own, and so relieved that all of his problems no longer have to be my stress.

Give your kids experiences

Even if it is totally out of your comfort zone, try to let your kids experience activities without you that will help them build self-confidence and independence. Sleep overs, all-day sports or other competitions, camping trips, and sleep-away camp are some good examples. Last summer my son went off to sleep-away camp for four weeks, and it was very difficult for me. I cried for days worrying about him. But, you know what? When I saw him on visiting day, I was blown away by how happy he was and how mature he acted. I was petrified that he would pick up bad habits and become a rotten kid, but the opposite happened – he became an even more amazing version of himself.

By adjusting some of our parenting techniques now, we can better prepare our kids for a successful life ahead of them.

Julie Lythcott-Harris
How to raise successful kids — without over-parenting

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