



Building Blocks of Lifelong Success:

A Parent's Guide to Raising Successful,

Independent Kids - Part I

by Michael Delman, CEO

About a decade ago, when I was a school principal, a parent scouting out the school I ran asked me to address the rumor that our school “focused on kids with problems.”

“It’s a middle school,” I replied, “so, yes, it does.”

Even the best kids struggle at times, famously so in middle school but throughout their childhoods as they try to figure out who they want to be and how to get there. The singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega says, “I would shelter you and keep you in light, but I can only teach you night vision.” As parents, our instinct is to protect our children; however, given our inability to shelter our children from the world, how do we teach them to manage the challenges they will face? How do we teach them “night vision”?



For more than 20 years, I’ve been working with kids: as a counselor for adjudicated youth, as a mentor, youth group leader, public school teacher, charter school principal, Executive Function coach and as a dad. Each role had or has its unique challenges and rewards, but my goals have been surprisingly consistent. *I want kids to be kind to others and true to themselves. I want the kids I mentor to have wisdom enough to know what they want and strength enough to pursue it until they succeed.*

Commonalities notwithstanding, parenting has its unique challenges because of our personal investment that is not only 24/7 but until we or our children leave this Earth. In my experience, the best thing we can do for our children is to focus on two broad categories: relationship building and skill building.

This first part of a three part series focuses on relationships, which serve as the foundation for teaching. The second installment will focus on how to help your child change habits and the third part will look specifically at overcoming academic challenges. The lessons in all three parts build on Executive Function skills to fortify our children, and ourselves as parents, to thrive in a world gone ADHD. These lessons are intended to be roughly sequential so that we have put some “money in the bank” before we push our kids to leave their comfort zones and stretch to new challenges. That process is often known as “R Before T” or putting the relationship before the task. Teddy Roosevelt is reputed to have said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Until a child is calm and feels cared for, that child cannot learn. Emotional regulation is at the core of growth and learning. With this in mind, we’ll begin by exploring the three key components of building relationships

with our kids: connecting, encouraging, and respecting them. Skill building and providing the appropriate level of challenge will follow.

Lesson 1: Connect

Click [HERE](#) for a brief video by Dr. Edward Tronick. Once you have watched the video, you've got the key message on a visceral level. It's pretty horrifying to watch. If you haven't, here's a summary.



Within seconds of being ignored, an infant will begin to show signs of distress. The longer it goes, the worse it gets. Reconnecting after the distress will eliminate the distress. Although older kids, especially teenagers, will frequently hide their reactions, they feel similarly rejected when they try to share what's important to them with us, and we either don't pay attention or judge them.

Their reactions on the extremes are also sad to watch: either kids who try too hard to please their parents or kids who oppose their parents aggressively and reactively, even sabotaging their own interests to stick it to their parents. If we think about it, that desire to connect and be seen drives us, too. When someone takes the time to listen to us, when someone laughs at our joke, or is curious about us, it sends a rush of good feeling through us. There are brain-based reasons for this, and the extraordinary news is that we can rewire our brains to feel the positive rush through healthy experiences even if we have developed negative habits. For example, if our children have learned to feel good by being bad, they can change. If we are in bad loops, even we as adults can change the pattern. (If you're interested in a basic understanding of the neurological underpinnings of this process, I'd recommend Loretta Breuning's book *Meet Your Happy Chemicals*.¹)

The man I knew who embodied Roosevelt's quote about caring before sharing was one of my mentors, Massachusetts Teacher of the Year and fellow charter school founder, Charlie Sposato. When he was principal of the MATCH School in Boston, Charlie would greet every one of his students before they entered school each day, shake the student's hand, say "I'm glad to see you," and ask why the student came to school. He knew that kids do not need to be well-known, but they do need to be *known well* by at least one caring adult. Great teachers provide that feeling; they stand at the threshold of their classrooms and acknowledge each student who walks into the room. We can do this as parents. Unless we happen to be hosting all the relatives for the weekend, I imagine that all of us have time to look up from our computers and greet our family members when they walk through the door and take a moment to check in. Of course, parents often complain that kids won't talk about their day anyway and offer the following scenario.

"How was school?"

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/files/attachments/59029/happy-chemicals.pdf>

“Fine.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

It could be the questions we’re asking, the tone we’re using, the pattern we’ve established, or that we’re actually busy ourselves and their lack of interest in talking to us is something of a relief as well as a disappointment. However, if we’re serious about building strong relationships with our children, we can address these issues. The following script is something I’ve used with my own kids and with kids I work with to get them interested in talking with me.

“Different question today. What’s on your mind these days?”

“Nothing.”



“Really, I’m interested. I know we don’t make a lot of time to talk, but I really want to hear about your life. I don’t even care if it’s just a cool YouTube video that made you laugh. Share something with me.”

“I’m busy. I have to do my homework.”

“Fair enough. But I’m asking for five minutes of your time before you go to bed tonight. Do you want to let me know when it works for you, or do you want me to ask again later when I have time?”

As the example illustrates, connecting means taking a genuine interest in our kids’ lives. We may want to discuss their grades but may have to begin with something more palatable for them. The younger they are when we begin this, the better it is for the relationship. When we think about Harry Chapin’s song “Cat’s in the Cradle,” we may be more willing to force ourselves to read the 43rd book in *The Magic Treehouse* series with our kids. Even though we’re pretty confident that Jack and Annie will somehow manage to escape from their latest predicament and bring another clue back to the fort, the point is not the plot of the book. The point is our kids’ excitement as we read to them or they begin to read to us. It’s enough that we’re together with them and paying attention to them, regardless of the book title or the YouTube video, or whatever other mind-numbing kid stuff they want to share with us. It may not be long before they don’t want to share with us. On a bright note, we might even find that their interests can be fun if we’re looking at them through their eyes.

Back to the infant in the video who felt abandoned – her mother was right there in front of her and not responding at all. This sort of mini-trauma is going to happen from time to time no matter how hard we try. We won’t take the deep breath, we’ll be caught up in our work, our own feelings of failure and frustration will leak out – in some way, we won’t be mindful and we’ll do something harmful. The best we can do in these instances is to make amends, literally to mend the relationship, to offer a genuine “I’m sorry. How can I make it up to you?” and to work on doing better. We can figure out what set us off and take responsibility for it being our issue. The mother in the video soothes the child, and the child feels better almost immediately. We have that kind of power as adults when we are connected with our children, and they know we love them.

Parenting Strategies for Connecting With Your Child:

1. **Knock Before Entering** - Instead of starting a conversation with a bunch of questions, try doing what Harvard psychology professor Robert Kegan calls “**knocking before entering**” and asking your child when it would be a good time to spend 10 minutes with you, either to talk about your respective days or to do something enjoyable together. (It can be for longer, but it’s harder for them to give a flat ‘no’ to a polite request when it’s for such a brief amount of time.)
2. **Show Interest in Their Interests** - Catch yourself being uninterested when your child is speaking, and make a decision to be interested in this child of yours, even if the topic isn’t one you love. Let them finish their story, even if it’s long or boring. You don’t have to lie about what a great story it was, just “Thank you for sharing” will suffice. This doesn’t have to happen for every story, but consciously pay them real attention, the type you’d give a famous person, on a particular occasion. Let your kid feel famous for you for that moment.
3. **Ask Questions** - Notice yourself being naturally interested in something your child is doing, and ask if she or he would like to tell you about it. Offer an observation or a question about it that is unlikely to feel judgmental to your child. “What made you choose to go with orange in that painting there?” or “How is it going compared to last week?”
4. **Acknowledge Your Mistakes** - The next time you say something harsh or snippy, acknowledge it to your child and let her know that that’s not really the way you want to be with her. “I can do better. At least I’d like to and will try. Bear with me.” Doing so models powerfully for your child that she can own up when she makes a mistake.

Lesson 2: Encourage



The former president of Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound once gave a talk that truly impressed me. He talked about the patience of growing trees. We do not look at a tree and complain that it didn’t grow much that day. We understand that it takes some time, and good conditions, such as receiving water and not getting overshadowed by other trees all the time. Kids are similar in so many ways, especially the patience it takes to believe that they will grow up to be strong and successful. We don’t

have to just hope. Like water for a tree, we can give them love and support and access to great opportunities. As with the sunlight, we can avoid comparing them to other people, which risks putting them in the shadows, and encourage them to focus on things they have an interest in and perhaps some talent at. But we don’t want to keep looking at them and wondering what’s wrong, and tell them how concerned we are. It’s like being on the airplane during turbulence – if the crew and captain are

calm, we stay calm. Likewise as parents, if we are responsive to but unruffled by the ups and downs intrinsic to our kids growing up, they will pick up on our cues and, at a certain level, know that they'll ride it out. Kids need to know that adolescence is real and that we get how hard it can be: that zits happen, that getting dumped is usually hardest the first time around, that friends can be mean sometimes though time sorts out who our true friends are. They need to know that caterpillars can turn into butterflies; that acorns somehow turn into oak trees; and that adolescents can emerge over time with a sense of clarity not only in their skin but in their thinking.

One of the most helpful things we can do for our kids both when they're doing well and, especially, when they aren't, has been popularized by the Heath brothers as "cloning a bright spot."² In



the early years, our kids take their cues from us. If we communicate our belief that they can do something, then it is likely that they will try. If they try, then they will at least make the first steps toward success. That taste of success is its own reward, enough so that it will motivate a child to try again, to keep learning, to apply that particular success to the more general idea that *effort leads to success*. They will then be more inclined to take advice, to try new endeavors, and to push themselves to explore their potential.

If we focus on what they have done well, then *they* will be more inclined to keep trying, and repeated effort – with a degree of reflection incorporated to make improvements – is the single greatest predictor of success. Encouragement does not have to border on the absurd as in, "Oh, you got 20% right! Great start!" However, we can give a genuine compliment that is limited in scope: "That introduction really makes me want to read the rest of your paper," is great if it's true. A reasonable backup can be an honest question, "So, what are you going for in that introduction?" After an explanation, you can always at least say, "Thanks for sharing!" and may be able to add, "Yeah, I can kind of see that, especially that one sentence right there. I'm not seeing the connection in the one after that, but that might just be me." It's not quite offering advice. Rather, by showing an appreciation for their goal and acknowledging an example of success, they may give us the space to also acknowledge our confusion on something that did not work as well for us. It becomes a *relatively* weak sentence, one that can be fixed to be as good as the others, as opposed to the focus of our entire conversation and an absolute bad.

Sometimes a little restraint is also in order. Silence can easily be worth 1000 words in these instances. My younger daughter told me that she got all of her math problems right on a worksheet, and after seeing how many they were and how mindless the assignment was, I nearly said, "Well, that sure was a waste of time. I'm not sure you learned anything or are really getting better at math." You might be thinking, "He thought *that!* How negative if not downright mean!" But perhaps you can relate to my less than generous thought. You, too, sometimes have that feeling that the school or a particular teacher failed on a particular day and you get worried that your kid is getting props for doing something that is, oh, kid's stuff. Fortunately, I took a breath and shook off the fear-based impulse to push my daughter harder and said, "Well, you sure have persistence. I bet you were bored sometimes, but you

² See their book *Switch: Don't Solve Problems - Copy Success*. Random House, 2010.

showed that you can work hard even when it's not exactly what you'd like to be doing and get a perfect score!" She beamed. I beamed, mostly at myself for not screwing it up.

Finally, a tip on process. Encouragement tends to look more like questions, not advice. As the immortal Stephen Covey says in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Parenting Strategies for Encouraging Your Child:

1. **Notice & Mention Good Behavior** - Instead of pointing out what your child is doing that you don't like, catch him or her being good. Point out something impressive, and keep it as your own observation. "I noticed you ignored your little sister when she was provoking you. Wow!" Do NOT follow the compliment with something you'd like your child to do as that will certainly be seen as manipulative.
2. **Compliment More Than Criticize** - Consider the well-researched study that good relationships show that it is necessary to give 5 or 6 compliments for every negative piece of feedback in order to maintain or build a strong relationship. That's a staggering statistic. Can you think of 5 or 6 compliments or even positive comments that would be honest? Try it and you'll get better at it. Saying "I love you" before saying goodbye in the morning and before bed counts. Leaving a sticky on the mirror saying, "Glad you're my son" counts too. Thanking him for remembering to leave his muddy shoes outside also counts. Over time as it becomes habitual, it gets easier and feels good.
3. **Create a Vision of the Future** - Write down a one paragraph vision of what your child might be like in 10 years or 15 years: well-adjusted, respectful to you, able to manage his or her basic needs. Share what you wrote with your child. It's just an exercise, and it doesn't have to provoke more anxiety. The idea is to know that things change, often beyond our current ability to imagine. By accepting the fact that, at the moment, things are the way they are and that, in the future, they will be what they will be, we can take some of the edge off, which will make us calmer, more influential and more effective.

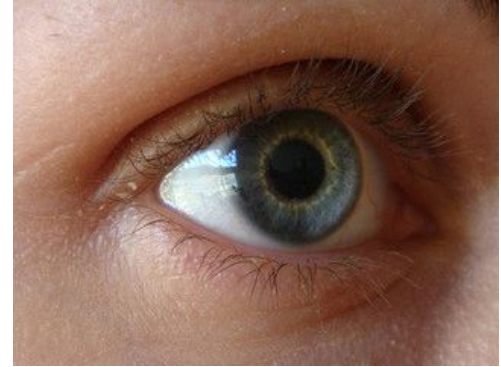
Lesson 3: Respect

Everybody wants respect. Oh, it's not just Aretha, or Robert DeNiro ("Are *you* looking at *me*?") People will get in fights, even end relationships over strange things that don't make sense to anyone else because what's really going on is they don't feel appreciated or respected. As parents, we want respect from our kids, which is reasonable to a point. After all, when we were kids, oh, our parents never would have put up with the crap they are pulling. No, sir. We had it rough, we did, all 37 of us sleeping in a paper bag in the middle of a lake! Okay, so Monty Python may have exaggerated a bit, but the point stands. We want respect, and we really do make sacrifices for them all of the time and it

would be nice if they said, “Thank you” or even “You’re great, Parental Unit” every so often. And did the dishes. And did their homework. And ...

And the purpose of this essay is, fundamentally, about not only *how* we can be more effective parents but *what it means* to be effective parents. The purpose of parenting is to help our children grow and become capable of managing themselves. So, our feelings, as powerful as they are, aren’t the primary focus. Our kids’ feelings are the focus. We have to be the adults in managing our own feelings when our kids may not yet have the skills to manage theirs. (Confession booth, but it goes in parentheses: managing my own feelings was probably the greatest struggle of my life. Being a teacher helped, but having my own kids pushed me to learn the skills I needed to do what is at least a good enough job.)

My own experience is that the old “You need to give respect in order to get it” is true. For me, it just seemed – best word for it? – dumb to demand that either my students or my own children treat me with respect before I would give it to them. It was faster, easier and more logical for *me to be the one to give it first*. Although it’s obvious, it’s so easy to forget that we only really control what we do. So, for me, I’m going to lead with being positive and respectful, knowing that reciprocation is almost guaranteed. While there



are certainly a few who will mistake kindness for weakness, most won’t, especially if you level with them. I have asked, “I’m sorry. Did I do something to deserve that tone of voice because I thought I was being respectful toward you?” The response is consistently, “No, Dad (or Mr. Delman when it was at school). I’m just ...” And what happens then? Usually, connection. Usually, something is on their mind. It’s a chance to strengthen the relationship. The breakdown of the word is “re” meaning “again” and “spect” meaning “to look.” To look again – to give a second look.

Kids really know when we see them as objects or a pain in our necks. It’s not very difficult if we’re criticizing them or even complaining about them behind their backs. And if we do not “look again” and understand them, they won’t respect us. And if they don’t respect us, then we can’t influence

them.

Here’s a poetic overstatement by Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet*. “Your children are not your children.” Basically, our kids have their own dreams and their own personalities, and our best job is to help them to discover what those are for themselves. Too many parents think they know what’s best for their children, and their teenagers, and their young adult children. However, the best thing we can do most of the time is to be a mirror that helps other people figure things out for themselves. “Other people” does include our own children. A dad whose son I used to work with kept telling me that he knows what his son needs to do because “he is just like me!” Actually, he’s just like himself! I know the dad and the son. I like them both. They do have some things in common (their last names, for example, are the same), but they also have tremendous differences. The dad’s insistence that he knows what his son needs has blinded him to seeing who his child is. The dad became more rigid about what his son

should do, and, not surprisingly, the son has chosen a path of rebellion that is far more intense than it needed to be given the son's naturally mellow disposition.

Obviously, we have thought through our values, and we assume that if our children adopt those values and the goals we have for them, then they will be successful and happy. However, if we model being true to ourselves while simultaneously encouraging them to think through their own set of values, we both build the relationship and open the door for them to come to us with questions as they figure out who they want to be. Moreover, they will also have the means to figure out solutions for themselves as they struggle with the vicissitudes (look it up, I did) of life.

We want our kids to become successful young adults, and we also want them to stay within the boundaries that we feel are best. For them to really grow up, we want to be careful not to play God, not to be like the producer of the *Truman Show* who simply can't bear to see his child grow up. We need to cheer for them as they make their own decisions, even if those decisions aren't the ones we would make.

The more that we allow our children to become who they feel they need to be, the more willing they are to share with us. And the interesting paradox is that the more they feel respected, the more they will allow us to influence them.



Parenting Strategies to Show Respect for Your Child:

1. **Shift Your Language** - To show respect for your child and to take yourself out of the equation, see if you can shift your language a bit. Instead of saying how "proud" you are of your child for an accomplishment, see if you can tell her how "happy" you are and how "proud she must be." It's not about us.
2. **Challenge Your Child** - Instead of giving them answers, give them challenges. It will help them with the vicissitudes of life. (Have you looked it up yet?) Your child tells you about something bad at school (a teacher, another kid, homework), ask what he thinks about it. "And what makes you say that?" is your follow up.
3. **Mindfulness & Meditation** - Consider whether you feel permission to really be yourself – now, as an adult, or whether you still think a great deal about what others think of you. While there's a healthy amount of restraint we all need to achieve particular goals, do you feel more or less liberated from the crap that made most of our lives miserable in middle school? If you're super anxious about what people think of you, you're probably going to put that anxiety on your child

who can't possibly focus on becoming his or her best if he or she is focused on trying to please you. Personal recommendations for this include therapy, mindfulness meditation, keeping a journal, and a number of thoughtful self-help books that will help you keep your eyes on the prize (your own satisfaction and your child's success) instead of on trying to make yourself or your child live up to some standards inherited from your own parents, the television or some other such thing.

Coming up, in Part II, we will explore some specific actions you as a parent can do to help your child be more effective. Here's the caveat: If you haven't read this first part and practiced the parenting strategies above, Part II won't be of much use. R before T - you need the relationship in order to have influence. If you have both influence and strong skills, you will find that you can have a huge impact on the success and happiness of your child.

Do you think your child may need expert academic coaching support? [Contact us today](#) to arrange a complimentary consultation and find out if coaching may be right for your child.

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