

Ten Life Skills for Teens

By Laura Kastner, Ph.D.

Even during the best of times, parents wonder whether their teens are developing all the skills they need to be successful in life. A problem in this “appraisal” process is that parents see their teens in some of their most regressed and infantile states—when they are at home with their families! Furthermore, new neuroscience research indicates that the human brain does not reach maturity until a person reaches their early twenties. So, how do parents of teens know what to look for in the development of life skills?

My short answer is “headway.” Parents want to see headway — progress — in their teens’ development of the top 10 life skills and be mindful of what they can do to nudge them along. But we also need to be realistic and sensitive to special considerations of temperament, learning style and circumstances.

1. Motivation for personal goals: initiative, engagement, willingness to try new things, persistence, work ethic, commitment, and a drive to pursue interests and personal development. Qualifier: The teen’s zeal may be for DJ skills, not physics.

2. Executive functioning skills: planning ahead; organization; execution and completion of projects; informed decision making; judgment; concentration; and self-monitoring. Qualifier: Half of the neuronal connections in the prefrontal cortex will be sloughed off in early adolescence, so harebrained inconsistency is the norm with teens.

3. Independent living skills and self-reliance: self-management with regard to money, cooking, laundry; public transportation; and job experience (with job application, interviewing, working hard, accepting criticism and following directions). Qualifier: Kids will squawk, but parents should insist on this stuff anyway.

4. Academic skills: basic skills to achieve age-appropriate educational goals; intellectual curiosity; study habits; and value on learning. Qualifier: Especially in middle school and during puberty, school performance may get a bit sketchy, but education is such a high priority that parents should go to the mat to make sure teens are “bonded” to school, establish homework habits, connect with teachers and do required work.

5. Physical fitness and healthful habits: value and self-care in relation to exercise, sleep, eating, health maintenance, and limitations on risk taking, substance use and media overuse. Qualifier: Parents can only control so much, but they control resources, so they can supply healthful food, yank media, insist on full-year athletic participation, and give consequences for problem substance use.

6. Emotional awareness, reflection and regulation: recognition and appropriate expression of feelings; empathy for others; ability to control impulses; and coping with negative emotions. Qualifier: Due to mood disturbance brought on by hormones and the immaturity of the “impulse control” center in the teen brain, teens will have tizzies, and parents need to focus on being supportive coaches and role models for these skills.

7. Social skills: ability to size up interpersonal situations; cooperation with others; communication skills; conflict resolution skills; gaining perspective; and accurate self-appraisal in groups. Qualifier: Since teens are individuating from their parents and constantly irritated with siblings, motivated practice of these skills will occur in other pro-social settings (e.g., school, service, extracurricular activities and friendships).

8. Relationship skills and values: ability to maintain relationships over time; friendship development; conversational ability; balancing needs of self and other in romantic relationships; and intimacy skills. Qualifier: Temperament plays a huge role in determining a person’s appetite for social interaction, but parents can encourage, model and provide a rich web of relationships for their teens, including those with wise elders.

9. Moral behavior, integrity and character: standing up for what’s right; conscientiousness; and responsibility for oneself and the less fortunate. Qualifier: Although the majority of teens will take risks, lie and break rules during these arousal-seeking years, they will also show remarkable attachment to “what’s right” — according to them. By the time these kids reach their mid-twenties, values have shifted, morphed, matured and become integrated into a system that usually reflects a lot of their parents’ values.

10. Spirituality and a purposeful life: ability to accept and cope with adversities; emotional resilience; drive for a meaningful life; and a value on reflection and growth over time. Qualifier: Patience and parental role modeling are key here (again).

The worst thing a parent could do with this list of qualities is to preach, lecture and talk too much about them to their teen. That would be like pelting a teen with fruits and vegetables and expecting it to provide good nutrition.

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