

Life Lessons to Teach Kids Before They Leave Home

As a parent, I've felt the temptation many times to sit my kids down and drill them on life's important lessons – especially the ones I had to learn the hard way. But this approach can be a fool's errand; we all know kids insist on making their own mistakes. My admonitions wouldn't have worked on them any better than my parents' lectures worked on me.

If you've come to the same conclusion, though, don't despair: there's still a way to get through to them. Your kids are always taking mental notes, even when you're not looking. Like it or not, your actions are at the core of what your kids will take with them into their adult lives. Seen through their young eyes, what you say and do in your own life will be the example they retain in spite of themselves.

Had I been able to put into words the living lecture I'd have wanted to give my own kids for a head start in life, it would have gone something like this:

1. **Don't be afraid to fail:** If you never fail at anything, you may be aiming too low, playing it safe, and doing what Stephen Covey used to call “playing par 9 golf.” So, keep challenging yourself, even – and especially – after defeats. Emerson wrote, “When it's darkest, men see the stars.” Failure and adversity are among the best ways to grow and to learn. (See these [10 quotes about perseverance in the face of adversity.](#))
2. **Find the good in yourself.** We all deserve to feel good about ourselves, without the need to derive our sense of self-worth from the people around us. Taken together, the judgments of teachers, parents, bosses and friends amount to a hall of funhouse mirrors – one in which you'll never get an accurate reflection of yourself. If you grow up longing for approval, you'll risk becoming a pleaser, dependent on others for your sense of security and well-being. The opinions of those around you – though worth considering – are slender reeds on which to base your self-image. Instead, pick what matters most to you and stick with it.
3. **And see the good in others, too.** The harvest from showing genuine interest and respect to others is almost invariably an increase in your own self-esteem. The world is full of other people, so don't go through life dismissing them,

- seeking distance from them, or being shy or afraid. Showing respect – and even reverence – for other humans is virtually always a “win-win” proposition.
4. **There's no substitute for hard work.** Honest work may be the surest path to self-respect. As alluded to in [a post about my earliest jobs](#), hard work is a privilege – it allows you to discover the depth of your own abilities, and to see the potential in others. Go the extra mile, and see how good you can be at something. The harder you work, the less crowded a road you'll find – fewer people than you think embrace work as a central path to self-worth.
 5. **Building great habits is critical.** The more of them you have, the more capacity you'll have to handle the many competing claims life throws at you. [Good habits can take you to unanticipated heights](#) – and in ways that'll almost feel effortless. The “muscle memory” from having developed good habits in your youth (yes, including basics like eating right, good sleep hygiene, regular study and exercise) will sustain you when others flag. Abraham Lincoln said, “by the age of 40, every man has the face he deserves.” So it is that your habits will lead you to a destiny you earn.
 6. **Don't expect fairness – at least in the short run.** To deal with life's unfairness, focus on the future, not on the past. Whatever happens, don't wallow. Concentrate on others, not on yourself. Legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi reminded players that, “it's not how many times you're knocked down, but how many times you get up again, that'll determine your destiny.” The message: just keep getting up.
 7. **Be kind – it has more power than you think.** In Aesop's fable about strength, [the Sun's warm rays win out](#) over the gale force of the North Wind. This gentle approach to influencing others may not be obvious in your early years. A bit of subtle kindness costs nothing, but can have huge benefits. Remember that it doesn't take much to help lift someone's burden, to say a kind word, to notice a success.
 8. **Take yourself out of the center.** The most miserable people I know live in a self-designed universe that revolves eternally around them. To keep their planets aligned, they desperately amass power, money, or fame – but their supernova usually ends up a black hole. One way to avoid this is by helping those less fortunate than you. As Helen Keller said, “There is no better way to thank God for your sight than by giving a helping hand to someone in the dark.”
 9. **Embrace reality.** President John Adams said, “Facts are stubborn things.” You can't change reality, so you need to face it head on. It might sound crazy, but you should seek out bad news – the earlier you find it, the earlier you can do something about it before it gets worse. Look for problems and *become* the solution. Nothing good ever comes of avoiding the hard truths.
 10. **“Solve” for the long term.** It's crucial to be deliberate about your life. One way to approach this is to ask yourself: What am I solving for? Pleasure is short-lived. Even happiness is dependent on circumstances, and temporary. But joy – or deeper satisfaction – is rooted in meaning. Joy lives beyond the moment and despite present circumstances; and it can be conjured when needed. Peace is the ultimate resolution of a life well lived. It derives from finding a oneness with a purpose outside of yourself. In your own life make peace the quest that trumps the constant allure of pleasure.

Consider keeping your own list of what you want to impart to your kids before they leave home. Even if you never show it to them directly, it'll serve as a map in case you need to make a few of your own course corrections.