***How To Raise An Adult* : by Julie Lythcott-Haim**

* This is a book about parents who are overinvolved in the lives of their kids. It looks at the love and fear behind our overinvolvement. It looks at the harm we cause when we do too much. And it looks at how we might achieve better long-term ends- and help our kids achieve even greater success- by parenting differently.
* It is necessary for children to develop a critical psychological trait called, “self-efficacy”-that is, what eminent psychologist Albert Bandura identifies as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations.”
* Too many of us do some combination of overdirecting, overprotecting, or over-involving ourselves in our kid’s lives. Humans need some degree of weathering in order to survive the large challenges life will throw our way. Without experiencing the rougher spots of life, our kids become exquisite, like orchids, yet are incapable, sometimes terribly incapable, of thriving in the real world on their own. Why did parenting change from preparing our kids for life to protecting them from life, which means they’re not prepared to live life on their own? So, have we lost our sense of what parenting well actually entails?
* I tell everyone who asks that admissions deans may seem to be interested in what you’ve racked up by way of accomplishments, but what they really want to dig into and find is a sense of who you are. What matters to you? What are you curious about? What makes you tick? What do you like to think about?
* For twenty-eight years, Phil Gardner has directed the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, and in recent years he’s seen a great deal of change when it comes to patterns and trends in the hiring of college graduates. According to Phil, “What is pervasive now is that parents are making decisions about what academic majors to pursue. If parents are choosing the major, if the students are not enthused about their major, it sets the kid up very poorly to transition out of college.
* Of course, we should dream big and inspire our kids to do the same and encourage and support them to the best of our means and ability. There’s nothing inherently wrong with a checklist of things to be accomplished in order to set ourselves up well for the next thing in life; to be successful we have to set goals and work hard to reach them.
* But if we’ve taught our kids that there is one predetermined checklist for their lives, we may be constructing a path that is more about us than them. And a path that isn’t about them may be a path to nowhere. We have dreams for them, but we must not shape the way they dream.
* Tyler Tingley, former head of school at both Phillips Exeter in Massachusetts and the Blake School in Minnesota, and now chief academic officer at Avenues in New York City, told me, “A growing phenomenon at Exeter was that parents would enroll their child as a boarder but six months later we’d discover that Mom and Dad had rented an apartment nearby. They had complicated reasons about doing it to be ‘a good parent’ to which I would reply, “The experience of living independently is a great feature of boarding schools. You develop independence by learning how to do your own laundry.” And speaking of laundry, I know firsthand that parents come to college campuses to do it for their kids. It’s not a rumor, and it’s not a Stanford thing. It happens on campuses everywhere.
* Colonel Leon Roberts became a professor and head of the Department of Chemistry and Life Science at West Point after serving in Afghanistan. Colonel Roberts stated, “The great majority are great men and women doing the right thing. But there is a creeping number who have parents that overmanage them, such as by driving them to their first assignment. You don’t need your mother to show up at the front gate of Fort Bragg with you, or help you find an apartment. You’re twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three years old. You need to deal with the landlord yourself. That’s part of learning to act as an adult. Our graduates are mature leaders of character well prepared to lead America’s sons and daughters and with all the right tools to be successful at the tasks the army will require of them. However, there are a small percentage of parents that will not, or cannot, ‘let go’ and continue to hover over their adult children.”
* Parents who have always “been there” for their kids can find it next to impossible to stop when the kid grows up and goes out into the world. After all, the stakes in the real world are so much higher than they were in childhood, so if we’ve always “been there” it seems rather cruel to stop when they’re grown and when their actions matter more than ever. Some parents actually *can’t* stop; “being there” has become hardwired into us. It’s not just how we parent anymore; it’s who we *are*. And our children, though chronologically grown, are now quite dependent on us, and seem to need us more than ever to still, “be there.”
* Ellen Nodelman, who taught English at Rockland Country Day School in New York, saw parental involvement in schoolwork skyrocket in the last fifteen to twenty of her forty-plus years at the school. “Parents are now vigilant over every homework assignment, and a whole lot of parents are doing their kid’s homework for them. They do it under the guise of helping their kids, but the kids feel helpless.
* Most school districts use some kind of student information software that includes a parent portal where parents can log on and see their student’s attendance record, grades, and so on. I’ve never checked up on my kid’s record online- this is one of those arenas where I want to reduce my involvement, not increase it, and where I expect my son and daughter to inform me of what’s going on as needed, just as my parents back in the day.
* Thinking back on the thousands of young people I’ve known from Stanford and my community and keeping those two I’m trying to raise very much in mind, I see that we want everything to be good and comfortable for our children. But that isn’t the reality of the world we’re preparing them for. They don’t learn to make choices or construct possibility from the vacuum of boredom. They don’t learn responsibility or accountability for their own behaviors. They don’t get the chance to stumble or build resilience. They feel supremely accomplished for things they really haven’t achieved on their own or, in the alternative, believe they are capable of accomplishing things without us. And there’s no buffer from the stress. There’s no freedom. No play. Hell-bent on removing all risks of life and on catapulting them into the college with the right brand name, we’ve robbed our kids of the chance to construct and know their own *selves*. You might say we’ve mortgaged their childhood in exchange for the future we imagine for them- a debt that can never be repaired.
* Kids are supposed to acquire and complete certain developmental tasks at certain ages. Even though many parents are highly educated and intelligent, they don’t have a good concept of what is developmentally appropriate for kids.

**A Different Kind of Checklist**

If we want our kids to have a shot at making it in the world as eighteen-year-olds, without the umbilical cord of the cell phone being their go-to solution in all manner of things, they’re going to need a set of basic life skills. Based upon my observations as dean, and the advice of parents and educators around the country, here are some examples of practical things they’ll need to know how to do before they go to college- *and* here are the crutches that are currently hindering them from standing up on their on two feet:

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to talk to strangers-** faculty, deans, advisers, landlords, store clerks, human resource managers, coworkers, bank tellers, health care providers, bus drivers, mechanics- in the real world.

The crutch: We teach kids not to talk to strangers instead of teaching them more nuanced skills of how to discern the few bad strangers from the mostly good ones. Thus, kids end up not knowing how to approach strangers- respectfully and with eye contact- for the help, guidance, and direction they will need out in the world.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to find his way around** a campus, the town in which her summer internship is located, or the city where he is studying or studying abroad.

The crutch: We drive or accompany our children everywhere, even when a bus, their bicycle, or their own feet could get them there; thus, kids don’t know the route from getting from here to there, how to cope with transportation options, and when and how to fill the car with gas, or how to make and execute transportation plans.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to manage his assignments, workload, and deadlines.**

The crutch: We remind kids when their homework is due and when to do it- sometimes helping them do it, sometimes doing it for them; thus, kids don’t know how to prioritize tasks, manage workload, or meet deadlines, without regular reminders.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to contribute to the running of a household.**

The crutch: We don’t ask them to help much around the house because the checklisted childhood leaves little time in the day for anything aside from academic and extracurricular work; thus, kids don’t know how to look after their own needs, respect the needs of others, or do their fair share of the good of the whole.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to handle interpersonal problems.**

The crutch: We step in to solve misunderstandings and soothe hurt feelings for them; thus, kids don’t know how to cope with and resolve conflicts without our intervention.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to cope with ups and downs** of courses and workloads, college-level work, competition, tough teachers, bosses, and others.

The crutch: We step in when things get hard, finish the task, extend the deadline, and talk to the adults; thus, kids don’t know that in the normal course of life things won’t always go their way, and that they’ll be okay regardless.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to earn and manage money.**

The crutch: They don’t hold part-time jobs; they receive money from us for whatever they want or need; thus, kids don’t develop a sense of responsibility for completing job tasks, accountability to a boss who doesn’t inherently love them, or an appreciation for the cost of things and how to manage money.

1. **An eighteen-year-old must be able to take risks.**

The crutch: We’ve laid out their entire path for them and have avoided all pitfalls or prevented all stumbles for them; thus, kids don’t develop the wise understanding that success comes only after trying and failing and trying again (a.k.a. “grit”) or the thick skin (a.k.a. “resilience”) that comes from coping when things have gone wrong.

*Remember: our kids must be able to do all of these things without resorting to calling a parent on the phone. If they’re calling us to ask how, they do not have the life skill.*

* A 2013 study of 297 college students reported in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* found that college students with helicopter parents reported significantly higher levels of depression and less satisfaction in life and attributed this diminishment in well-being to a violation of the students’ “basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence.”
* If from the time you’re born all your options are dictated for you and all your decisions are made for you, and them you’re cast out into the world to go to college, it’s like a country under colonial rule that falls apart when it gains it’s independence. They get to college and have no idea why they’re there or what they ought to be doing there. They’re lost. They’re in such a painful place, and they seek to anesthetize that with drugs or other harmful activities like alcohol, gambling, or mutilation. Things that express their emptiness and sense of desperation. Often, they become addicts simply because they don’t know what else to do.

**The Life Skills Deficit and Mental Health Problems**

* When parents have tended to do the stuff of life for kids- the waking up, the transporting, the reminding about deadlines and obligations, the bill paying, the question asking, the decision making the responsibility taking, the talking to strangers, and the confronting of authorities, kids may be in for quite a shock when parents turn them loose in the world of college or work. They will experience setbacks, which will feel to them like failure. And, in a cruel twist of irony, they then won’t be able to cope with that failure very well, because they haven’t had much practice at failure, either.
* Psychologist, Dr. Karen Able stated, “Overinvolved parenting is taking a serious toll on the psychological well-being of college students who can’t negotiate a balance between consulting with parents and independent decision making. I work with students to practice the critical thinking, confidence, and independence skills they don’t have. But if they end up calling or texting a parent instead, they aren’t practicing these skills in the ways I’d like them to, which means they still haven’t acquired these skills. When children aren’t given the space to struggle through things on their own, they don’t learn to problem solve very well. They don’t learn to be confident in their own abilities, and it can affect their self-esteem. The other problem with never having to struggle is that you never experience failure and can develop an overwhelming fear of failure and of disappointing others. Both the low self-confidence and the fear of failure can lead to depression and anxiety.”

**The Three Overparenting Styles That Do Psychological Harm**

* Psychologist and author Dr. Madeline Levine rose to nationwide prominence for her New York Times best-selling books *The Price of Privilege* and *Teach Your Children Well*, which details the stress and strain of young people in middle-and upper-middle-class communities are under. She travels around the country at the invitation of PTAs, school boards, and community centers, telling parents everywhere to calm down and pull back. As Levine tells it, the greatest harm lurking in the lives of our kids is not the rare occurrence of the perverted stranger on the street but the declining mental health and wellness of children whose parents do too much for them.
* Levine has spoken on this topic before tens of thousands of parents in hundreds of communities in recent years, and on a chilly night in January 2014, I was one of them. The talk was held at Henry M. Gunn High School, one of the top public high schools in the nation. Dr. Levine warmed us up with a segment on parent perception, which went something like this:

“There’s a popular, potent story right now that says success is a straight line from the right school to the right college to the right internship to the right grad school to your chosen profession.”

“Raise your hand if this is the path that you took.” About 5 percent of the hands went up.

“That’s right,” she said. “In any group of people only 1-10 percent have taken a straight trajectory. The much more common route is circuitous.”

“But kids don’t know this story,” Levine continued. You look like a genius to your kids. They don’t know you struggled and failed; it’s the biggest secret we keep from our kids Our kids need to hear the everyday challenges that we have. We ought to share what our trajectory was, particularly when that includes failure.”

* The arc of Levine’s message was that we should support our kids in being who they are by providing the opportunities that fit the kid as opposed to trying to make our kid fit our notion of who the kid ought to be- and to embrace the benefits of trial and error.
* She then shared her research on the three ways we might be over-parenting and unwittingly causing psychological harm:
1. When we do for our kids what they can *already* do for themselves
2. When we do for our kids what they can almost do for themselves
3. When our parenting behavior is motivated by our own ego
* Levine said that when we parent this way, we deprive our kids of the opportunity to be creative, to problem solve, to develop coping skills, to build resilience, to figure out what makes them happy, to figure out who they are. In short, it deprives them of the chance to be, well, human. Although we overinvolve ourselves to protect our kids and it may in fact lead to short-term gains, our behavior actually delivers the rather crushing news: “Kid, you can’t actually do any of this without me.” It increases our kid’s chances of suffering from depression, anxiety, to become cutters, and to have suicidal thoughts.”

**The Mental Health Costs of Failure**

* Some parents champion an authoritarian parenting style where the parent dictates a narrow path of academic and extracurricular goals and punishes a kid for not achieving constant excellence. Some parents tend to disregard or disbelieve the mental health concerns we’ve been discussing. I’ve seen this kind of attitude in parents of all ethnicities and across the socioeconomic spectrum.
* The data emerging about the mental health of our kids only confirms the harm done by asking so little of our kids when it comes to life skills, yet so much of them when it comes to adhering to the academic plans we’ve made for them and achieving more, ever more academically. They are stressed out of their minds *and* have no resilience with which to cope with that stress, and we continue along our pressuring path, as if this trauma is not happening, or as if somehow our kids’ struggles- this suffering- is, or will be, “worth it.”

**We’re Hurting Their Job Prospects**

* A study found that students who experienced helicopter parenting through college were more likely to be dependent on others, engage in poor coping strategies and lack the soft-skills, like responsibility and conscientiousness, that employers value.
* To succeed requires taking initiative, solving problems, and bouncing back from adversity, now more than ever.
* Suzanne Lucas says what’s typical today is to receive a call from a parent asking why a kid didn’t get a job or internship. When she’s on the receiving end of such a call, Suzanne’s blunt response is, “Because it’s you contacting me, instead of your kid; I need someone with drive.”
* Of course our kids want our advice. Of course we want to give it. But an employer wants to see maturity and self-confidence in their young employees. Employers want employees who have the wherewithal to handle things- which means handle things on their *own*.

**The Core of Self**

* Between their late teens and early twenties, we want to launch a kid who still loves us and wants to see us, but who also has the wherewithal to make his or her way in life, with a lot of skills and a mind-set of “I think I can, I think I can!” Another word for that mind-set is “self-efficacy,” a central concept within the field of human psychology developed by eminent psychologist Albert Bandura. Self-efficacy means having the belief in your abilities to complete a task, reach goals, and manage a situation. It means believing in *your* abilities- not in your parents’ abilities to help you do those things or do them for you.
* Self-efficacy is more than just believing in yourself like that small blue train in *The Little Engine That Could*. Self-efficacy is about having a realistic sense of one’s accomplishments (neither overblown or undersold). It’s about learning that when at first you don’t succeed you can indeed try, try again and you’re likely to make progress perhaps even to a point of recognizable achievement and maybe even to a point of mastery. Self-efficacy is different than self-esteem, which is the belief in one’s worth or value. Self-esteem influences self-efficacy, but self-efficacy is built by doing the work and seeing that success came from effort. Self-efficacy is built in large part by the repeated trial-and-error opportunities afforded by childhood.

**Four Ways to Parent**

* **Authoritarian**: *demanding and unresponsive.* These parents are strict, expect obedience and respect, and punish their children for failing to comply. They don’t explain the reasoning for their actions- they are the “because I *said* so” type. Their children have a lot of responsibility in the home and few freedoms outside of it.
* **Permissive/Indulgent**: *undemanding and responsive.* These parents tend to attend to their child’s every need and comply with their child’s every request. They are reluctant to establish rules or expectations, and thus have little basis for or need to discipline. They remind to the point of nagging, but the behavioral consequence they threaten rarely comes. They “give in” regularly and are reluctant to say no or enforce consequences when they do say it and feel their kid can do no wrong. Some are very present physically in their child’s life. They want their children to like them, and act more like friends than parents.
* **Neglectful**: *undemanding and unresponsive.* These parents are, at best, “hands off,” and at worst criminally negligent. They are uninvolved in their child’s school and home life, are emotionally distant, and often physically absent. They are more likely to live in poverty, and their neglect may be caused by that, or by mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.
* **Authoritative**: *demanding and responsive.* These parents set high standards, expectations, and limits, which they uphold with consequences. They are also emotionally warm, and responsive to their child’s emotional needs. They reason with their kids, engaging in a give-and-take for the sake of learning. They give their child freedom to explore, to fail, and to make their own choices.
* Helicopter parenting tendencies fall into one or both of two types: authoritarian and permissive/indulgent. They are authoritarian if they bring a heavy hand of direction to their kids’ academic, extracurricular, and home lives, instilling a fear of failure with little regard for what each kid wants to pursue. They are permissive/indulgent if they are focused on pleasing their kid, praising their kid, protecting them from failure or harm, and sticking up for them in the world, with little regard for building skills, a strong work ethic, or character. The third type of parent- “neglectful” is the anthesis of a helicopter parent as they exhibit disinterest in the developmental needs of the child.
* The fourth type of parent- “authoritative”- sounds like a combination of “authoritarian” and “permissive,” and rightly so. But unlike authoritarian parents, authoritative parents explain the reason behind the rules, treat their child like an independent, rational being, and are emotionally warm with their children. Authoritative parents also share some traits with permissive/indulgent parents- they are involved in their kids’ lives and are responsive to their needs, but unlike permissive parents, authoritative parents don’t let their kids get away with things. Authoritative parents balance warmth with strictness, direction with freedom. Authoritative parenting is “the sweet spot” between authoritarian and permissive parents.
* The “sweet spot” of authoritative parenting- halfway between permissive and authoritarian, and not in any way neglectful- will help raise our children to truly succeed in life, where we can be proud not only of them, but of ourselves. It will involve making children do things for themselves, so they develop competencies and confidence. It will involve teaching them to think for themselves rather than rely on others to tell them what’s what or what matters. It’s also about being adult enough to set standards and expectations about our children’s character and effort and being able to enforce those standards and expectations. And about accepting our own imperfection- and theirs; neither we, nor they, will get things right all of the time and life is so much joyously lived when we accept this.

**Teach Life Skills**

* Compared to their less-advantaged peers, children in middle- and upper-middle-class families often have the tasks of daily life done for them by their parents (or other caregivers or hired help). We absolve our kids of these tasks- things like waking themselves up, keeping track of their own belongings, and making meals- in part to show our love, in part to make life easy and nice, also perhaps in part to ensure that these things are done correctly, and even at times out of a need to feel a greater sense of purpose in our own lives. Being able to do so much *for* our kids is very much a function of extra money and leisure time.
* When we do everything for our kids, we do so with the best of intentions. But when it comes to getting ahead in life, skills like getting to places on time, being in charge of your own backpack or briefcase, and knowing how to cook turn out to be as important as schoolwork, piano lessons, and competitive sports.
* A person hand-held through life- where things are always taken care of for them- doesn’t have the opportunity to develop the concept of *mastery* at the heart of psychology professor Albert Bandura’s theory of “self-efficacy,” which is the belief in your abilities to complete a task, reach a goal, and manage a situation.
* Having things done for you and having no control over those outcomes can also lead to a kind of “learned helplessness,” a concept that describes how humans shut down when they feel they have no control over situations.
* Beit T’ Shuvah is an addiction treatment center that has been serving the Greater Los Angeles area for decades. Historically their clientele were people in their thirties and forties. Recently the staff has seen a sharp increase in young adult clients, many of whom appear to suffer from this “learned helplessness” and lack of “self-efficacy.” With this changing demographic in mind, the staff of Beit T’ Shuvah conducts prevention outreach programs at schools and community centers in the Greater Los Angeles area and elsewhere across the nation. Their target audience is parents, and they focus their message on how the seemingly benevolent act of handling everything for one’s kids can lead those kids down a path toward alcohol and drug addiction.

**Things Your Kids Should Be Able To Do For Themselves**

**Ages 10 to 13: Gaining Independence.**

* Stay home alone
* Go to the store and make purchases by himself
* Use the washing machine and dryer
* Plan and prepare a meal with several ingredients
* Use the oven to broil or bake foods
* Iron clothes
* Learn to use basic hand tools
* Mow the lawn
* Look after younger siblings or neighbors

**Ages 14 to 18: More Advanced Skills Are Learned.**

* Cleaning the stove and unclogging drains
* Fill a car with gas, add air to and change a tire
* Interview for and get a job
* Prepare and cook meals

**Yong Adults: Preparing to Live on His Own.**

* Make regular doctor and dentists’ appointments and other important health-related appointments
* Have a basic understanding of finances, and be able to manage his bank account, balance a checkbook, pay a bill, and use a credit card
* Understand basic contracts, like an apartment or car lease
* Schedule oil changes and basic car maintenance
* Adam Mindel is on the executive management team at Beit T’ Shuvah, where he directs a parent program he lovingly calls “Mothers Without Borders”- the support groups for addicts’ parents who are often entirely too involved in managing the lives of their adult children. “They can’t tolerate letting their children struggle or have fear. They grasp for control in every way, and don’t allow their children to figure it out. We have ‘children’ who are twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five years of age, with parents chronically looking to manage their activities. It’s like they’re still holding them in their arms; what I’m trying to teach parents to do is *put their children down*.
* In addition to the lingering concerns about safety, one of the hardest aspects of letting our kids do the stuff of life for themselves is giving up on an ideal of perfection that *we* can most likely achieve but our kids most likely can’t.
* Today everything is done for children. We’re biologically programed to want to fend for ourselves, to operate out of this survival mode, but the way we live now completely contradicts everything our genes have programmed for us. I’m a big advocate for the idea that a lot of the unhappiness we experience comes from us not following our evolutionary path. When you start to learn how to do things at a young age, it gives you purpose- this idea that I can fend for myself.

**Building A Work Ethic: The Role of Chores**

* There are things we need to ask kids to do in order to teach them to pitch in, put some skin in the game, and see a job through to its completion for the betterment of the family, household, team, or other group. The authoritarian parents are already requiring these kinds of things of kids, but in a dogmatic way; the permissive/indulgent parents are not requiring it much at all. Taken together, teaching life skills plus a “stick-to-itiveness and pitch in” mindset builds a work ethic in kids and is evidence of greater authoritative parenting.
* A kid who does chores has a greater chance of success in life, according to Dr. Marilynn Rossman, professor emeritus of family education at the University of Minnesota. Rossman defined “success” as not using drugs, having quality relationships, finishing education, and getting started in a career. She relied on data from a longitudinal study conducted by the definitive authority on parenting styles, Dr. Diana Baumrind, and concluded that those who were most “successful” began doing chores at three or four years of age, whereas those who waited until their teen years to start doing chores were comparatively less successful.
* George Vaillant’s famous longitudinal study of Harvard students from their time as undergraduates through their entire adulthood also concluded that chores in childhood is an essential contributor to success in life. Vaillant explained that “work plays a central role in an individual’s life- so much that it trumped having a strong family background as a predictor of mental health in adulthood. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist, author, and former faculty member at Harvard, says chores build the kind of “can-do, want-to-do feeling” that leads a person to feel industrious rather than incapable.
* So, chores matter a great deal. Yet children today spend significantly less time doing chores than did previous generations. Instead, our daily lives are taken up with our child’s schoolwork and enrichment activities. And there’s the pressure of homework- which automatically excuses a kid from having to do any work around the home.

Extracurricular activities, tests, and homework are important, but equally important is that we teach our children the skills and values that come from doing chores. Through chores, they will learn:

* Responsibility for contributing to the work of the household or the team
* Autonomy in handling tasks
* Accountability to meet a deadline and a particular level of quality
* Determination to get a job done well
* Perseverance when challenges are met
* The value of taking the initiative instead of waiting to be asked
* Even if our child’s sweat equity is not *needed* to ensure the smooth running of our home, they must contribute, know how to contribute, and feel the rewards of contributing in order to have the right approach to hard work when they head out into the workplace and become citizens in the community. In short, chores build the kind of work ethic that is highly sought after in our communities and in the workplace.

**This Is A Parent’s Right and Responsibility: Don’t Shrink from It**

1. **Model it**. Don’t tell your kid to go do work while you lounge on the couch. The best way to teach work ethic is by example. Let them see you working. Ask them to pitch in. When you’re setting out to do something in the kitchen, yard, or garage, call to a kid, “I need your help with this.”
2. **Expect their help**. You’re not a concierge. You’re their first teacher: their parent. The greatest impediment to instilling a work ethic in our children just might be ourselves, particularly if we’ve been on the permissive/indulgent side of the parenting spectrum and have tended to be very focused on our kids’ happiness and enjoyment while being quite aware of how busy they are with homework and extracurriculars. But we’re trying to grow our kids to adulthood, where they’ll need the skills that come from chores. Chores at home become the “grunt work” of employment- the stuff they do to “pay their dues” and advance up the employment ladder. They may not like being asked or told to do things, and they’d certainly rather be on their phone or some other device, or with friends, or really doing almost anything else, but they will come to feel a sense of accomplishment for having done whatever you’ve asked.
3. **Don’t apologize or overexplain**. Talking a problem over with a child is a great way to help them come to a decision and to show you care, which is a hallmark of authoritative parenting. But chores are an area where the authoritative parent articulates the rules and values of the household. Talking their ear off about the why and how behind your request that they do chores, or how you know they won’t like it, but they really need to, or how you feel badly asking them to do it, isn’t useful. Overexplaining makes you look like you feel the need to justify your request. And if you apologize in the asking, along the way, or after the fact, you’ll undercut your own authority as a parent who has the right and responsibility to ask your kid to help out. Your kid might grumble in the short term, but in the long term they’ll thank you.
4. **Give clear, straightforward instructions**. Figure out what you want done and say so. When a task is new to a child, explain the steps. Then back off. Don’t hover as they do. Don’t micromanage.
5. **Give appropriate thanks and feedback**. Don’t overpraise. A simple, kind, confident “Thank you” or Nice job” is sufficient. Save your over-the-top praise responses for when they’ve really gone above and beyond in their effort or accomplished something truly exceptional.
6. **Make it routine**: If you set expectations that some chores are daily, others are weekly, and others are seasonal, your kids will get used to the fact that something always needs to be done in life, and that pitching in and helping out is a way to feel useful and good and will be recognized. Over time if you’re been saying to your kid, “Hey, I’d like you to pitch in and help me with this,” and if, when you see them struggling, you pitch in to help them, your kid will start to look for ways in which the can “pitch in” when they see another family member, friend, neighbor, or coworker in need.

**Purpose Matters**

* Bill Damon, Stanford professor of education and director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, stated that his research indicates that a sense of purpose is *essential for achieving happiness and satisfaction in life.* He defines purpose as a person’s “ultimate concern,” that which, when known, becomes a person’s ultimate answer to the questions “Why am I doing this?” and “Why does this matter to me?”
* Millennial Smiley Poswolsky, whose best-selling 2014 career guide *The Quarter-Life Breakthrough* has shown thousands of young adults how to pivot their lives toward purpose, writes of the desire he and so many of his generation have to find “meaningful work.” For Poswolsky, meaningful work “provides personal meaning reflecting who you are and what your interests are, allows you to share your gifts to help others, and is financially viable given your desired lifestyle. “So many young people I talk to end up pursuing paths out of parental pressure rather than personal alignment. This leads to confusion and resentment, and sometimes unhappiness.”
* As dean, I became very interested in helping my students hone in on their purpose as a way of starting them on the road toward meaningful work. I’d tell them to forget what you think “everyone” expects you to study or do for a career. I’d say, *Study what you love, and the rest will follow*.”
* Sebastian Thrun, the German-born Silicon Valley genius behind the self-driving car, Google Glass, believes that a sense of purpose will lead not only to happiness and to meaningful work, but also to success. “I say, ‘Listen to yourself, listen to your intuition,’ he says. “Many kids have a complete disconnect with their inner feelings; instead they’re attuned to ‘tell me what to do and I’ll do it.’ If you’re passionate about what you do, then you’re going to find a job. Relatively few people are actually passionate about what they do, and when you’re passionate you’re twice as good as anybody else. When you hit the working world and you want to be really successful, there’s no one around to tell you what to do. You’ve got to know yourself well enough to know what you want to do.
* When we decide it’s our job to determine what our kid should explore, study, or do for a living, we run the risk of focusing on who they *aren’t* (but wish they would be), and explicitly not seeing, valuing, and loving the person they actually *are*.

**Tips for How To Support Your Kid In Charting Their Own Path**

1. **Accept that it’s not about you, it’s about *your* kid**. Set aside your definition of a successful career, what you’d be proud to be able to say to others about your kid, or what you’d always assumed or hoped your kid would be or do. This is no small feat. It requires a fundamental commitment to the belief that their life isn’t about you. Many parents struggle with this piece, but it’s essential that you get there. Being able to differentiate your life from theirs is an essential contributor to their mental health- and yours.
2. **Notice who your kid actually is**- what they’re good at, and what they love. Your kid has a great chance of living a meaningful and purposeful life at the intersection of what they’re good at, what they love, and what they value.
3. **Explore with diagnostic tools**. Through the Clifton StrengthsFinder test (which can be accessed for free if you’ve already purchased a copy of a *StrengthsFinder* book, or can be purchased by going to [www.gallupstrengthscenter.com](http://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com)), a person can learn from their top five strengths out of the thirty-four talents or skills most common in humans based on Gallup’s research. Parents may find the Clifton StrengthsFinder test to be a fun and useful tool for gaining insight into how a kid is going to find meaningful and purposeful work in the world. It’s appropriate for persons aged fifteen and older. Similar types of tools are the Strong Interest Inventory, which seeks to match a person’s interests with possible careers, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory, which can help a person better understand how they enjoy functioning in the world and the kind of careers that they might find rewarding. All three of these tools are used by college career services centers throughout the nation.
4. **Be interested and helpful**. Once we begin to develop a sense of our kid’s interests, we can support them by a willingness to seek out school activities, summer camps, and other forms of enrichment that can help them develop their interests.
5. **Know when to push forward, know when to pull back**. If your kid has the budding talent for something *and* a good deal of interests in it, by all means support it to whatever degree you can. But if your kid lacks the interest, that’s a red flag that no matter how talented they might be, it’s not likely to be something they want to do with their life. If you push them anyway, they may end up bitterly resenting you no matter how much they’ve “succeeded” at it or how proud you are to be able to say they’ve done it.
6. **Help them find mentors**. Kids of any age can feel nervous at the thought of engaging an adult in conversation, but as with the professors I advised my undergraduates to go meet in office hours, almost any adult is happy to respond to the simple, thoughtful question “You seem to love what you do. When and how did you figure out that’s what you wanted to do.”
7. **Prepare them for the hard work to come**. Parents often tell their kids that they can be anything they want to be or that their dreams will come true; both platitudes are half right- believing in yourself and having dreams is really important – but the other half of the equation, which there is simply *no* way around, is hard work. When we over-praise our kids- telling them everything they did was “great!” or “perfect!” we give them a false sense of what it’ll take to achieve their goals in the real world one day. Being able to give a kid a reality check and constructive feedback are crucial. We do this by telling our kids what it actually takes to succeed in the real world- hard work, relationship-based connections, perseverance, resilience, and some amount of good luck.
8. **Don’t do too much for them**. When you’re highly excited about your kid’s interests, you may find yourself wanting to do too much to further things along. Your kid must be in the driver’s seat. They must be the one to make it- whatever “it” is- happen.
9. **Have your own purpose**. Share with your kids whatever it is about your work that gives you a sense of purpose and meaning. If you help them understand how *you* became a person with purpose, you’ll inspire them to want to do the same. Let your kids be inspired by that passion you have for that thing, whatever it is, and let them hear you talk about your plans, and see you making strides, toward making that dream come true.

**Normalize Struggle**

* A lack of resilience is common among addicts. Harriet Rossetto of the Beit T’ Shuvah rehab facility in L.A. says, “the best predictor of success is a sense of resiliency, grit, and the capacity to fail and get up. If you’re prevented from feeling discomfort or failure, you have no sense of how to handle those things at all.”
* Depriving our kids of the chance to struggle and to learn to persevere, while we focus instead on preparing them to be the number one at all things and tell them how awesome they are, is a prime example of our best intentions gone awry. Perhaps we didn’t realize that “protecting” our kids from falls and failures could hurt them. But it can. We need to help our children gain resilience to cope when things don’t go their way.
* We’ve got to let our kids fail. We’ve got to let them struggle. It seems really basic, but it’s very hard to do. There is something we can do to normalize struggle for our kids and help them build the toughness they’ll need in order to thrive as adults in the world. We can help them become resilient.

**Building Resilience in Kids**

* Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. It’s what gives us the will to go on. Carol Dweck, the Stanford psychology professor who pioneered the concept of “Growth Mindset” discusses how to build resilience. Focused on undoing the “fixed mindset” that comes from praising kids for being smart and results in kids avoiding harder challenges because they don’t want to receive results contradicting this “smart” label, Dweck teaches that we must instead teach kids that it’s their *effort* (something they have control over), not some innate level of intelligence (something they have no control over), that leads to ever higher levels of achievement. The mantra with growth mindset is to keep going, keep trying, and learn through effort that you can get where you want to go; in a sense, Dweck is teaching resilience when it comes to learning.
* New York Times best-selling author Brene Brown teaches what I think of as resilience of spirit. Brown has become the nation’s thought leader on subjects most of us have a very hard time discussing vulnerability, imperfection, and shame. Brown helps her audiences and readers appreciate how accepting our fears, imperfections, and vulnerabilities can lead to a more joyful, happy life. She coined the term “Wholehearted Living” and describes a “Wholehearted” person as someone who can go to bed each night thinking, “Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.”

**How to Really Listen to Your Children**

The American Psychological Association advises that listening and talking are key to a healthy relationship between parents and children- particularly teenagers. The following is based on the APA’s “Communication Tips for Parents.”

1. **Be available**. Pick the time when you know that child is most willing to talk. Don’t start with a question that’s on your mind- show an interest in what they’ve been doing or what matters to them. Teenagers often feel their parents only want to talk about grades, accomplishments, or college applications. Show them you care about *them*- their interests, joys, and concerns.
2. **Let them know you’re listening**. Stop what you’re doing and listen. Make eye contact. Listen without interruption, even if what they’re saying is hard for you to hear. After they’ve spoken, repeat it back to them. You might say, “So it sounds like you’re really enjoying this….” or “I’m hearing you say that this is really stressful….” Ask them if they want your advice or specific help in problem solving, or if they just want you to listen while they vent.
3. **Respond in a way they will hear.** Kids often test us by telling us part of the story and gauging how we react before saying more. If you listen carefully and encourage them to talk, you may hear the whole story. Kids will tune us out when we start to get emotional or angry, so be mindful about how you’re coming across. Focus on their feelings but try to keep your own very balanced.

**Daring to Parent Differently**

* If we walk our kid’s path with and for them, we’re not only depriving them of the chance to build self-efficacy- that basic need to do for *oneself*- we’re also depriving ourselves of the chance to continue to construct our own path. You see, you still matter even though you’ve become a parent. You’ve got to make sure you’re walking your own life path- not only for your own sake, but for your kid’s sake too.
* The research shows that kids think of parents as their *heroes*. They look up to us more than they look up to any adult figure in their lives. We are their biggest role models. Our kids notice *everything* we do and don’t.
* Instead of showing kids that a parent’s primary purpose and function is to hover over a kid and facilitate all of their interactions and activities, we need to show them- through the choices we make, the activities we undertake, and the principles we value- what it actually means to lead a fulfilling adult life.
* It’s not selfish to make ample room for the things we value in life: It’s critically important. In order to be good role models, we need to put ourselves first. This may sound completely incongruous to you (women in particular may struggle with this, as often we are raised to put others’ needs before our own), but an airline’s worst-case-scenario directive about putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others is extremely practical advice for living life generally. The same advice comes from financial planners who tell us to save for our own retirement before saving for our kid’s college expenses, and from eminent twentieth-century psychologist Carl Jung, who admonishes parents to lead their our own lives so our kids don’t end up dealing with the neuroses that come when we don’t. Whether from air travel safety videos, financial planning, or the field of psychology, the wisdom boils down to this: We humans are at our most capable and are of most use to others when we’ve first looked after ourselves.
* Are you an adult? Do you take care of your basic needs, think for yourself, work hard, and make time for relaxation? Are you resilient? Do you chart your own path? Can you look past what others think is popular or best and make choices that feel right to you, all things considered? Of all of these attributes that characterize a self-actualized adult, I’d wager that most of us who over parent have in common a wobbly ability to think for ourselves, that is, sometimes we let the powerful tide of other people’s fears and opinions sweep us through life. Sure, we’re hard at work and at parenting, often to the point of exhaustion, but toward what end? Working hard to lead a life dictated by the neuroses of others leaves us little wherewithal for relaxation and enjoyment, to loom after our basic needs, and to weather the struggles that inevitably come. And of course, the notion of charting our own path goes by the wayside when we’re caught up in keeping up with others or living our child’s life as if it is our own.

**How to Look After Yourself (You’ll Be A Better Parent as A Result)**

1. **Discover your passion and purpose, and chart your path accordingly**. If you’re overfocused on your kid, you’re quite likely under focusing on your own passion. Despite what you may think, *your kid is not your passion*. If you treat them as if they are, you’re placing them in the very untenable and unhealthy role of trying to bring fulfillment to *your* life. Your passion and purpose can be absolutely anything you want, as long as it’s not “my kid.”
2. **Learn to say no**. The overparenting herd always has more ground to cover. You have to start speaking up for yourself even if others may resent you for wanting to step back (or for having the guts to say so).
3. **Prioritize your health and wellness**. We’re of less use to our kids, loved ones, colleagues, and friends if we’re not physically and emotionally well. Are you eating in ways that are good for your body, exercising in a form you enjoy, and removing unhealthy addictions from your life? Consider reducing your stress and increasing your self-awareness through meditation and yoga. If you ever think, *I can’t start exercising, learn to meditate, or cut down on my bad habits right now because I need to get my kid through this baseball season or their school applications*, I’m suggesting that you stop that kind of thinking and, instead, seriously consider that you have your priorities- or at least, the way you address your priorities- backward.
4. **Make time for your most important relationships**. Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant, the main researcher behind the longest study of human experience ever conducted (known as the Harvard Grant Study), found when looking at the study’s subjects at the end of their lives, “The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people,” and “Happiness equals love- full stop.” If you’re in a relationship, are you giving it enough attention? Do you look each other in the eye, let each other know you matter, take time to talk and listen at the end of each day? Is there enough intimacy? Vaillant says it’s the “capacity for empathic relationships” that matters. Being in empathic relationships with other humans helps us feel good about ourselves and stay focused on the things that matter most to us.
5. **Interrogate your relationship with money**. First, if you are one of the few among us who are wealthy, ask yourself if money is what you value most. If so, all right, that’s your choice, but allow that your kid may want to live by a different value system. Your kid’s life is more important than an assets comparison lifestyle.
6. **Practice kindness and gratitude**. Open a door for someone (and thank the person who holds the door for you). Smile at the cashier and ask them how *their* day is going. Where kindness is about *doing*, its partner, gratitude, is about recognizing what’s been *done* for you. It’s acknowledging the janitor, the store clerk, the nurse, your colleague, or your kid. People who are kind and helpful to others live longer, healthier lives, have fewer aches and pains, and experience less anxiety and depression. Over time if you offer more kindness to the world and notice and speak up about what you’re grateful for, you’ll be inviting a great deal more happiness- and good health- into your life. And you’ll be a better parent.

**Be the Parent You Want to Be**

* Vulnerability expert Dr. Brene Brown writes that being able to experience our vulnerability, our fears, and “the torture chamber that we call uncertainty” exposes us emotionally, which is actually a really good thing. “There’s no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness,” she writes. Many of us can’t fathom allowing ourselves to experience or express such emotions because we feel a need to be perfect or appear to be perfect at everything we do; we worry a great deal about what others may think but it’s those feelings of vulnerability and fear that, if unexamined, can keep us going along with the herd, even when we know there’s a better path.
* Palo Alto parent Brian knows many moms and dads whose whole focus is their children. “If that’s how you build your social life, self-esteem, or self-worth, then when your kids are gone and married, or at college, what happens to you?” Instead of leading this “child-centric” life, Brian and his wife lead what they call a “family-centric” life based on this simple philosophy: “We don’t focus on the kids as the primary reason for being.”
* Those of us who are unable to consider anything other than the currently popular overparenting model of child rearing may not be living lives of choice; we may have let the herd choose for us- and for our children.

**Conclusion**

* In my decade as Stanford’s freshman dean, I had the honor and privilege of working with thousands of other peoples’ eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old sons and daughters. Over the years I bore witness as the once relatively distinguishable stages of adolescence and adulthood increasingly blurred. Each year it was harder to convince parents of college students to take a backseat and let their son or daughter be the driver of his or her college experience. At some point my gut instinct said, *Something’s not right. What’s to become of us if the next generation doesn’t have the wherewithal to be adults?*  Parents hovering over children well into adulthood became more rule than exception. And anxiety, depression, and other problems with mental health and wellness in adolescents and young adults were on the rise.
* I began writing this book from a place of fierce concern for adolescents and young adults- and I ended up with a good deal of concern for parents as well. I began with a belief that “those parents” were the problem and was humbled to discover the ways in which I was one of “those parents” myself. I began with a desire to shed light on what was wrong and was inspired by all I learned about how we can turn things around and make things right.
* As parents our dream was to have a child, but we can’t forget that our children have the right to dream for themselves. But overhelping *causes* harm. If we develop and sustain good relationships with our kids, they will always value our perspective and perhaps even seek it. But as they age, we must not be overly invested in having them do what we say. Join me in doing the right by those children by leaving the herd of hoverers, by fostering independence, not dependence, and by supporting them in being who they are rather than telling them who and what to be. Together we can push the parenting pendulum back in the other direction: toward raising adults.