

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Complaining on Family Trips

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in School Age Children
Four Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior

Question: Whenever we go on family outings or trips, my daughter constantly complains that she is bored. It takes the fun out of it for everyone. How can I help her enjoy these experiences?

Family trips can be great opportunities for you to extend your child's interests. You can help these outings be more fun by promoting the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

Craig Ramey of Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Research Institute and his wife, researcher Sharon Ramey, have reviewed hundreds of studies to identify what parents do that best promotes the development of intelligence, social competence and academic achievement. The first principle they write about is encouraging exploration. Craig Ramey says,

When we encourage [children] to explore, we let them know that the world is a very interesting place and that they are going to have a great time as they sort of meander through it—if they keep their eyes and ears opened and their sense of touch going. They're going to discover things about the world that will be of enormous benefit to them.

1. Foster your child's interests. When your child cares strongly about something, she is less likely to complain. Karen Wynn of Yale University finds that parents and other adults promote learning on the deepest level when they tap into children's interests and enthusiasm and build on them. For example:

- You help encourage your child's interests when you talk about the family trip or outing with your daughter before you leave so that you can connect this experience with something that she is interested in. Have her select one thing that she would like to do or find out about during this trip. Some families use a family meeting for this kind of planning, where each person on the outing—including the adults—selects something of interest that he or she would like to do.
- Sometimes, it is during travel time when children express the most boredom. See if you can turn this part of the trip into an interesting experience—not just by entertaining her with screen time—but by playing active games such as I Spy.
- Once you have established something that interests your daughter, give her an active role. Have her act as the tour guide for that part of the outing. Does she love to write? If so, put her in charge of organizing lists of supplies or writing a travel journal.
- While you are on the outing, promote your child's curiosity. This means asking lots of questions and encouraging her to ask them, too. Open-ended "wh" questions, like "what," "who," "when" and "why," are great prompts for discussions as you travel.

- Help your child be active in her own learning. Is she interested in animals? Encourage her to research local animal life at your destination and make a checklist for the trip to keep track of what she sees.
- Praise your child's efforts. Say things like: "You learned so much about the history of this town. It taught me a lot and made me enjoy the trip even more!" When your child feels like what she has to say is important to you and others, she is more likely to go even deeper in her learning.

Geoffrey Canada, CEO and President of the Harlem Children's Zone (a gold-standard early childhood program), says it is vital to recognize that children learn in different ways and are good at different things, and these need to be promoted:

We want great music, great art, great sports. We want young people to excel in multiple things, not just in academics.

2. Engage your child intellectually, emotionally and socially. Children learn best when they are fully engaged. Build on your child's strengths and present her with experiences in ways that are meaningful to her. Ask yourself how your child learns best.

- Does she learn better independently or in a group?
- Is she a visual learner or does she prefer hearing information to understand it?
- Does she tend to observe or jump right in?
- Does she draw, perform or write to express herself?

Ask your child about the kind of learner she is. This will prompt her to reflect on her own thinking, an essential skill for learning and life.

3. Make a plan with her to stop so much complaining. You can involve your child in a problem-solving process by making a plan together for future family trips. This will help her make decisions based on her goals and encourage her to be accountable for her actions. She will also be practicing the life skill of Focus and Self Control to follow the plan.

- Your child is old enough to have a discussion about her behavior on family trips. You can say something like: "Every time we go on a trip together, you say you're bored and want to leave, and then nobody ends up having a good time. Why do you think this keeps happening, and what can we do to stop it from happening?"
- Talk about goals, for both you and your child. In this instance, your goal is likely to be for your child to enjoy trips instead of complaining.
- Work together with your child to come up with solutions. Ask her what ideas she has to help her manage. Would it help to bring along something to read or write or draw with?
- Incorporate your child's ideas into the solution you select to try. If your child feels like you are really listening to her, she is likely to come up with creative ideas.
- After you have tried the solution, make sure to talk about how it is working. If it's not, go through the process again and select another solution to try.

According to Jack P. Shonkoff of Harvard University, "There is no development without relationships."

4. Be an example. No matter how old your child is, you are her most important teacher. She looks to you for how to manage different situations and learns both from what you say and what you don't say.

- Pursue your own interests and hobbies. This shows your child that learning happens throughout one's life. Be sure you talk with her about your experiences and share what you are learning.
- Use "boredom busters." You model problem-solving skills for your child when you play games like adding on to each other's drawings or stories, or singing songs while you are traveling.

- Try not to let your child's attitude and behavior spill over on to you. Be intentional about what you want to convey to your child. Do your best to remain calm and encourage her to use the strategies you have talked about.

When you promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning, you are working to keep the fire of learning burning brightly in your child's eyes, encouraging her to develop a lifelong love of learning.

These four strategies will promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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