

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

How to Encourage Your Child to Develop Interests

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in School Age Children

Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My son seems not to have very many interests. I worry that he isn't excited about many things. How can I help him find some interests?

It is normal for children to go through phases where they have intense interests and phases where they seem not as excited about things. You can support your child through all of these phases and help him explore new ideas and experiences by encouraging the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

Patricia Kuhl, a scientist at the University of Washington, notes the importance of looking for what makes your child's eyes light up:

As I've watched my own child grow, there are various times and various things that light her up. As parents and as caretakers of a whole generation of kids, we have to be tuned in to the engagement process.

1. Look for a glimmer in your child's eyes that reflects an interest. Are there clues that might tell you what your child is noticing or thinking about? With your encouragement and support, something as small as your child's watching a car on the street can turn into an interest in cars that leads to a passion for understanding how the objects in our lives work. Or watching the rain make patterns on the windows could lead to a passion for photography.

The research of Laura Schulz of MIT has found that children are interested in things that are new. When you extend your child's learning with new information, he is able to build knowledge and skills that help him stay motivated and become more of a self-directed learner.

2. Jump-start your child's imagination. Any way that you can find to deepen your child's experiences will help him discover new things. Think about what is happening in his life. Did he or another family member recently take a trip somewhere? Does he have a favorite character from a movie or video game? Use these ideas as starting points for discussions and activities.

- Take a trip to your local library and look for books about some of these subjects. Encourage your child to find different types of reading material, like books with photographs, storybooks and magazines.
- Give your child a subject or question to think about, like: "What will the world be like in 50 years?" Then, ask him to write or tell a story, paint, draw or use some other kind of creative way to express himself.

Geoffrey Canada, the CEO and President of the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, says it is essential for parents and teachers to recognize that children learn in different ways and are good at different things. Every child's individual strengths 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.

3. Offer your child experiences that involve his brain, his body, his feelings and his relationships. Emotional learning, social learning and academic learning are all connected when children are really absorbed in learning. Look for experiences or activities that engage your child on all of these levels. Some questions to start with to get some ideas are:

- Does he seem to like one-on-one activities, or does he like to be around a lot of people?

- Does he do well in one particular subject at school?
- Does he like to be active or participate in calmer activities?
- What are some of the things his friends seem to be interested in?

Keep in mind, many children have schedules full of after-school activities, schoolwork and other responsibilities. Make sure your child has enough time to relax and enjoy unstructured play time during the week. Find a schedule that works for your whole family.

The research of Bethany Rittle-Johnson of Vanderbilt University shows that when children are able to explain what they are thinking to others, their ability to use what they know in the future is strengthened.

- 4. Ask your child open-ended questions.** Ask questions that use the words “who,” “what,” “where,” “when” and “why.” Questions like these ask your child to come up with more than simple yes or no answers. Try asking questions like:
- “What is one new thing you did today?”
 - “When was a time you laughed today?”
 - “What is something you learned today?”

You can make these questions part of your routine at the beginning or end of the day. Make sure to share your own answers to the questions with your child. This is a great way to connect with your child every day and learn more about what is on his mind.

- 5. Talk to your child about the things that interest you.** When you keep your own fire for learning alive, your child is likely to follow your lead. When your child sees you doing something that interests you, like reading a book or playing a sport, he learns from your example. You will also benefit from taking time for yourself to do something you enjoy!
- Point out to your child the things you are interested in and what you do to learn more. You can say something like: “The story in the newspaper about the history of our community interested me. I am going to talk with some of our older friends and neighbors to see what they remember about this community when they were growing up.” Give your child the chance to join you.

Janellen Huttenlocher of the University of Chicago says:

It’s very important that [learning] be embedded in a positive environment where everybody is thrilled ... [about] learning something [they care about].

- 6. Create a community of learners.** Adults and children both benefit from what Larry Schweinhart of the HighScope Perry Preschool Project calls a “learning community.” When your child is surrounded by supportive and caring examples of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning, he sees the rewards of being an active, lifelong learner.
- Look for opportunities for your child to take in new information that he cares about by learning from and with others. Team up with family members and friends and ask them to share their interests and hobbies with your child.

These six 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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