

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### My Child Always Wants the Newest Technology

Promoting the Life Skill of Critical Thinking in School Age Children

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

**Question:** Every time a new version of my son's cell phone comes out, he wants me to buy it for him. How can I get him to stop asking for the latest thing?

Technology is an important part of today's world, but it can be a real challenge to figure out its place in your child's life. Both of you might feel pressure from others to keep up with the latest technology, and it can get expensive. By promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking, you can help your child learn to make smart decisions about managing what he wants with what he needs.

**Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz has been examining parents' role in promoting children's Critical Thinking skills in everyday activities. She says that when parents join into the process of asking questions and looking for the best answers with their children, they help their children learn to think in this way.**

#### 1. Help your child do research about what he wants to buy from written information and from other people.

First, figure out what you need to know about the new phone. For example:

- In what ways is the new phone different from the old phone?
- How do these new features work, and are they necessary?
- How much does the new phone cost? Is the contract over for the old phone? Is there a trade-in price?
- What is the value of the price it would cost to get a new phone? What else could you buy with that amount of money?

It would be very easy for you to say either yes or no to the phone, but by going through this process with your son, you are teaching him to be a good consumer as well as developing his Critical Thinking skills.

Now, help your child figure out how to find the answers to the questions you have developed. He could go to the local library and look for reliable websites on the Internet or read reviews in technology magazines.

**Paul Harris of Harvard University and Melissa Koenig of the University of Minnesota have studied how children develop an understanding of whom they can trust for truthful information. Koenig and Harris found that children do not necessarily just believe what they are told. As they get older, children are better able to identify the people they can trust for accurate information. They also found that adults are essential in helping children learn to evaluate the accuracy of different and even conflicting information.**

Think about your friends, family members, neighbors and colleagues as "experts" who can share their experiences, knowledge and interests with your child. Talking to others and listening to their opinions is another great way to gain information that might help to guide your child's decision making.

- Ask him to interview these "experts" who have had experience with the technology he wants. What do they like about

it, and why? Do they think it was worth the price?

- Encourage your child to write down what he finds out.
- Finally, help him think critically about the sources of information and what he learned from them. How does he know the information is accurate? If he has heard conflicting advice, what does he think is true, and why?

**2. Give your child responsibility for contributing to the cost of the phone.** Although children’s “gimmes”—“give me this, give me that”—can be annoying, this behavior provides families a great opportunity to help their children learn about the value of money. Giving them responsibility for contributing to the cost of a purchase makes the value of money real, helps children prioritize about how to spend money and makes every purchase more meaningful.

- Talk about the cost. How does the cost compare to other things you might purchase for that amount of money?
- Talk about the family budget and how you decide what to spend your money on or not. This is a great time to share your values and your realities about spending money.

Whether or not you ultimately decide to buy the new phone, you need to think through what you would expect him to contribute to the purchase. For example:

- How much should he contribute to the purchase price?
- Where would he get the money for his contribution—saving up from his allowance (if he has one), earning the money by doing special (not regular) chores or requesting the phone as a holiday or birthday gift?

**Critical Thinking involves “thinking about our thinking” by reflecting, questioning, reasoning, planning and evaluating. In the words of Frank Keil of Yale University:**

*Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you’re doing and to evaluate.*

**3. Encourage your child to reflect on the research and conversations you have had.** Reflecting means using the skill of Focus and Self Control—stepping back from a situation and thinking about all of the information involved before making a decision.

**Philip Zelazo of the University of Minnesota says:**

*Our research over the years has suggested successful goal-directed problem solving depends on reflection on information including what you know and how it relates to the problem as you find it. Reflection results in and makes critical thinking possible.*

- Ask your child to reflect on the information you have gathered. What are the benefits for him of getting a new phone? What are the drawbacks? If possible, ask him to write down his answers and to come up with a creative way to share them with you—like through a story, drawings or photos or his own magazine articles.

**Problem-solving involves a step-like process of arriving at a conclusion, drawing on Executive Function skills. Philip Zelazo describes it like this:**

*If you want to start to characterize more precisely what’s meant by executive function, think in terms of the sequential steps that people must undertake in order to solve any problem in a goal-directed fashion.*

**4. Use problem-solving to arrive at a conclusion.** At this point, you and your son are ready to make a decision about a new phone.

- Talk about the benefits and the drawbacks that he has outlined. Do you agree or not?
- What is the conclusion he has reached about buying a new phone? What is the conclusion you have reached?

By going through this process together, the chances are high that you will agree. If not, you call the decision, perhaps agreeing to reopen the discussion at a specific time.

**5. Encourage your child to be a critical viewer.** When watching television with your child, use it as an opportunity to continue to develop your son’s critical viewing skills. Act like a television critic, and ask your child questions like:

- “Why do you think the company chose to sell shoes that way? Do you think those shoes will make you cool, or is the company just trying to sell you something?”
- “Do you want to buy that video game after watching that commercial? Why, or why not?”

- “Do you get sick of seeing this ad, or is it fun to watch? Why?”
- “Ask your child to write, draw or videotape his own ad or commercial for the phone he wants. How would he sell the product?”

If you think your child has gotten information that isn't true or that his friends or television are influencing him, ask him how he can find out if the information he is getting is truthful.

**These five strategies will promote the life skill of Critical Thinking and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Critical Thinking** is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

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**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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