

Seven skills every student needs

Kids tend to think that success is measured by good grades, accomplishments in sports, or popularity. The truth is that these are simply the outward trappings of success. True success in school and in life is found when adolescents learn to make wise personal choices and demonstrate good character. In this story, teachers unveil their years of experience with students of all abilities and share a list of seven skills they believe all students need to be successful.

Finding success

Most teachers can site examples of academically gifted students who never seem to reach their potential. Those same teachers also offer stories of “very average” kids who work hard and achieve incredible success in school, college, and in the work world. So, what sets those two groups of kids apart?

Educators generally agree that intellect alone is not a guarantee of success. Intelligence is a tool that students can use to build success—but, as with any tool, it is of little value if it is never used. The students who succeed are most often those who use their gifts to perform to the best of their abilities. Those successful students learn certain skills that give them an edge in school and in life.

A list of personal skills

In a student’s early years, adults generally make the decisions. By the middle school or junior high school, however, a student begins making his or her own decisions. Students learn to organize, to prioritize, and to communicate less like small children and more like adults. That transition can be awkward, but with encouragement and practice, adolescents can learn personal skills that will pay big dividends throughout their lives.

So, what personal skills do tweens need? A group of teachers, former teachers, and guidance counselors responded to that simple question. The following is a compilation of responses. Their combined experiences and advice provide a great place to begin as parents speak with their children about what it means to be successful.

- ***Accepting responsibility.*** Adolescence is a time of new freedoms, but with freedom comes personal responsibility. At this level, students begin choosing from sports, music, social activities, school clubs, and other activities—all interesting and worthwhile things. Throw in a few video games each day, some Facebook time, and a couple of phone calls and there is little room left for homework and studying. Successful students take charge of their time and their behavior. They recognize the importance of meeting deadlines, doing their best on assignments, and being organized.
- ***Keeping a positive attitude.*** Adults often find themselves facing things they don’t like work. That does not mean they have the right to ignore the boss—that will only get them reprimanded or fired. School is the workplace for kids. And

although kids can't get fired, there can be serious consequences for poor attitude and poor behavior. Every student is bound to encounter something in his or her school career that seems hard or unfair. Some students respond by complaining, "I think that assignment (or teacher) is lame, so I'm not going to do it." That attitude will do little to resolve the situation. Successful tweens learn to embrace challenges. They refuse to let circumstances dictate how they feel or act. They seek solutions rather than simply point out the problems.

- ***Learning to work with others.*** The world is filled with difficult people and school is not an exception. Personalities and ideas are bound to conflict at some point. Whether in the classroom or in the cafeteria, successful adolescents practice cooperation, diplomacy, and good manners. They understand that working with others means pulling their own weight, leading where appropriate, and compromising when needed.
- ***Setting goals.*** A person can climb into a car and drive all day, but without a destination, that driver will never really get anywhere. In the same way, a student who spends 13 years or longer in school without goals, can find themselves having accomplished little. Goals help maintain focus and give students a way to measure success; so goals need to be achievable and measurable. Students need to know that with effort, they can reach a goal and to easily recognize when they met that goal. Equally important, goals must be personal. Not every student is going to get an 'A' in technology or have perfect attendance. Successful students set personal goals that reflect their abilities and their individual circumstances. Goals can be short-term such as finishing a project on time or long-term such as improving those science grades.
- ***Advocating for self.*** Parents generally speak to teachers or other parents on their young child's behalf. As children grow into adolescence, children begin to exercise a measure of independence and may feel uncomfortable having parents step in to resolve a question or problem. Unfortunately, those students may be equally uncomfortable taking on that responsibility. Successful students learn to respectfully address teachers, administrators, and classmates—asking questions, resolving problems, or presenting a differing point of view.
- ***Maintaining good health.*** Eat nutritiously; get plenty of rest; exercise daily. It's advice that kids begin hearing in preschool. Compared to students who neglect themselves, students who take care of their bodies have more energy, perform better in school, and have a better outlook toward themselves and their world. Beyond meeting those basic physical needs, successful tweens are conscious of (but not overly consumed by) personal hygiene and appearance. Not everyone has movie star looks or an athlete's physique, but a maintaining healthy body-image is another critical element of success.
- ***Practicing self-assessment.*** By these middle years, most kids understand the difference between right and wrong; they know when they have done well and not so well. Truly successful kids routinely step back and look objectively at

themselves and their behavior. As one teacher said, “They take a moment to listen to their conscience, to that little voice in their heads that lets them know how they are doing.” They recognize their accomplishments and feel proud and personally rewarded for working hard, meeting goals, and “doing the right thing.” They also look objectively at places where they miss the mark and develop goals to improve their work habits and personal behavior. Equally important is their understanding that some problems are not easily solved by themselves or a quick chat with peers. With adolescence come complex physical, social, and academic changes that few preteens are equipped to face without help. Successful kids will seek the help of a responsible and trustworthy adult such as a counselor, teacher, or parent.

Parents can help

Moms and dads play a huge role in the ultimate success of their children. Parents cannot be present every moment of every day to help guide and make decisions for their tweens—and parents shouldn’t. Kids at this age are changing and beginning to exercise their independence. They are bound to make mistakes; that’s part of growing up. With a little help from parents, however, kids will not only survive, they will develop the personal skills they will need to find success in school and in life.

So what can parents do? Here are a few very simple tips:

- **Listen.** Working, caring for the home and family, and other obligations can fill a parent’s schedule. It’s important to take a moment every day to listen to your tween. Turn off the television and the cell phone (dinner time is a great time) and let your child tell you about the events of the day. Don’t pass judgment, just listen. Watch your child’s expressions and body language for subtle clues as to how he or she is feeling.
- **Encourage.** Adolescence is a time of uncertainty and mistakes. Former friends can become harsh critics. Physical changes can rattle self-image. It is likely that your child may need a friendly reminder that these struggles are a part of growing up and that you are there with your support.
- **Advise.** As adults have already survived the preteen years. Chances are that parents once faced some of the same things their children are facing. When the circumstances warrant it, a little parental advice can go a long way. Parents can’t micromanage every detail, fix every problem, or be aware of every struggle, but they can occasionally step in with wisdom gained through experience.
- **Respect.** Tweens are naïve, adventurous, and prone to occasional mistakes. They are also at a stage where they are developing their independence. The challenge for parents is to protect and guide their children and, at the same time, to encourage and respect that independence.