Top Ten Tips for Raising a



theselfdrivenchild.com

Dr. William R. Stixrud: bill@selfdrivenchild.com
Ned Johnson: ned@selfdrivenchild.com

Foster a sense of control in your child.

Be a consultant. Say "It's your call" whenever you can. Be a non-anxious presence in your family. Encourage flow. Make promoting a healthy sense of control a top parenting priority. A sense of control can minimize the harmful effects of stress, is key to self-motivation, and is highly associated with physical health, mental health, and both academic and career success. Experienced as both autonomy and confidence in one's ability to cope, a sense of control strengthens the regulation of the amygdala (the brain's "threat detector") by the prefrontal cortex (executive functions), which results in emotional resilience and mental clarity. It appears to be good for virtually everything, presumably because the brain and body work best with a sense of control.

Say "It's your call" whenever you can.

Encouraging kids to make their own decisions is one of the most powerful ways to foster a sense of control. Tell younger children, "You're the expert on you." With teens, tell them, "I have confidence in your ability to make decisions about your own life and to learn from your mistakes—and I want you to have a lot of experience making your own decisions before you head off to college." As a consultant, you can help your children and teens make informed decisions by thinking through pros and cons with them. Go with your child's decision, unless virtually everyone would agree that it's completely unrealistic.

Be a non-anxious presence in your family.

Organizations, including families, work best if the leaders are not highly anxious or emotionally reactive. Stress is contagious, and at any age, we can best help kids if we can stay calm when they face challenges. When we are stressed, we tend to seek more control over our children, leading us to scold, lecture, or nag, even when we know it doesn't work. The good news is that calm is contagious, too, and one of the best ways to help our children avoid high levels of anxiety—and to manage anxiety if it develops—is to effectively manage our own. Ideally, home is a calm "safe base," where everyone in the family can relax and recover from the stress of daily life.

Be a consultant.

Think of yourself as your child's consultant, not his boss or manager. Remember that it's your child's life and that you really can't make him do anything against his will. Offer help and advice but don't force it on your child. A "carrots and sticks" approach of controlled (rather than autonomous) motivation is stressful, and stress makes it harder for kids to hear your advice. If homework is a battle, tell your child "I love you too much to fight with you about your homework." Offer to be her homework consultant, which allows you to step back without stepping away. And, as much as possible, give your child enough space to solve her own problems because it is by successfully handling stressful situations in a supportive environment that kids develop strong stress tolerance and resilience.

Take the long view.

The idea that only top students who go to elite colleges become successful is not only patently false but is also deeply discouraging to the 90% of kids who will not be in the top 10% of their class. Moreover, a high percentage of students who do go to elite colleges suffer from anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. So, instead of viewing high school as a four-year audition for college, we recommend seeing healthy brain development as the most important outcome of adolescence. We also suggest being patient with kids—and that kids be patient with themselves—because so many successful adults were late bloomers, who simply needed the benefit of time to come into their own.

Encourage flow.

Research suggests that one of the most effective ways to develop autonomous motivation in children and teens is not to enforce dutiful completion of homework but to encourage the passionate pursuit of their pastimes. Videogames may be an exception, but we know that when kids are deeply involved in play (Legos, dance, music, sports, art…), they are experiencing a brain state that combines high energy, high effort, high focus, and low stress. This is the brain state we want to nurture in kids for success in adult life. So, support kids to fully engage in and work hard at something they love. Also, don't threaten to take away the activity a kid loves most (e.g., sports) to motivate them for the thing they like least (e.g., school). It never works.

Make sleep a family goal.

Sleep is arguably the most important input for a developing brain (and for maintaining a developed one!). When kids are well-rested, they learn better and more easily develop resilience and motivation. When adults are well rested, they find it easier to be non-anxious, consultative, and supportive of autonomy in children. So, model good sleep habits, and let your kids know how important it is for you to be well rested. Also, encourage each family member to take a lesson from financial advisors by "paying yourself first." Experiment to see how much sleep you need to feel rested and then brainstorm ways to move in that direction. Once sleep is "in the bank," "spend what is left" on the activities and goals that matter to you, not the other way around.

Seek to understand your child's tech.

Many of the parents we work with are, understandably, gravely concerned about their children's difficulty setting limits on their use of technology—and the battles that ensue from trying to impose limits. The first impulse of many parents is to radically restrict their kids' use of video games and social media, often without first attempting to understand why these appeal to their children. Although we recommend minimizing young children's exposure to technology, once kids start, we suggest that parents learn about the games and apps their children like, show interest, and participate with them as much as possible. This is because it is much easier to influence children's (especially teens') use of technology when we treat them respectfully. Also, one of our major goals as parents is to help kids learn to manage their use of phones and computers. We want to work with them, not against them, and we don't want to send kids to college until they have learned to regulate for themselves their use of these powerful and omnipresent technologies.

Help your kids build "radical downtime" into their daily schedule.

There is compelling research evidence that "doing nothing" is highly beneficial for children's development. Specifically, periods of downtime for mind wandering or daydreaming activate the brain's Default Mode Network, fostering creativity and problem solving. Downtime also plays an important role in young people's development of a sense of identity and a sense of empathy. Don't schedule every moment of a kid's day, as downtime is as integral to successful activity as activity. Additionally, extensive research has demonstrated that meditation benefits children and teens in the same ways it benefits adults, and we recommend that parents learn to meditate and support schools in offering meditation to students.

Focus on How You Make Your Kids Feel.

Your kids will so often forget what you said or what you did, but they will remember how you made them feel. If you sometimes struggle to find the right words or perfect advice, think of how you want them to feel. Loved. Trusted. Supported. Capable. And, above all else, let that be your guide.