

# DEVELOPING YOUR CHILD'S HABITS *of* SUCCESS *in* SCHOOL, LIFE *and* WORK



*by Dr. Arthur L. Costa*

**A**s a parent of three daughters and a grandparent of six granddaughters, I reflect with great satisfaction on their being successful in school, in their work, and in their life as marriage partners and parents. With hindsight, I know I made many mistakes along the way, but I've learned from the process. I hope this article will help parents understand and foster positive learning habits in their children—habits that will produce success in school, work, and life.

Considerable research demonstrates that successful people in most any walk

of life display certain characteristics or dispositions. I call them habits of mind. They are patterns of thinking and behaving in intelligent ways and are displayed when confronted with life's dilemmas and problems. We want our children to develop those habits that lead them to become lifelong learners, effective problem solvers and decision makers, able to communicate with a diverse population, and to understand how to live successfully in a rapidly changing, high-tech world.

In this article, I describe 12 of those habits, suggest strategies for how you, as

parents, can help your child develop them, and suggest ways to observe whether your child is getting better at them. I focus on problem solving as an example of their relevance and importance, although they also apply to students' efforts to deal with many complex learning projects and activities, and contribute in many ways to achieving important goals in school, at home, and throughout life. This list is not complete, and as we learn more about "success habits," I am certain that we will discover additional indicators of growth in children's thinking abilities.

## 1. PERSISTING

*“Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.”*

Dale Carnegie

Persistence contributes to success in solving problems. Efficient problem solvers persevere even when the solution to a problem or challenge is not readily apparent. They have learned, and can apply, a wide range of problem-solving strategies. Children often give up in despair when a task or the solution to a problem is not immediately known. You might hear them say, “I can’t do this,” “It’s too hard,” or, they just want to get the task over with as quickly as possible. They lack the ability to analyze a problem or to develop a system or strategy to accomplish their goal.

Children develop persistence by increasing their use of alternate strategies of problem solving. They collect evidence to indicate that their problem-solving strategy is working, and if one strategy doesn’t work, they know how to back up and try another. They realize that their strategy must be rejected and another employed. They have systematic methods of analyzing a problem, knowing ways to begin, and knowing what steps must be performed and what data need to be generated or collected.

Help your child by reminding him or her of previous successes with similar tasks or problems, that there are many strategies to try, and that they are effective thinkers and problem solvers. It is more helpful to learn three ways to solve one problem than to learn one way to solve three problems!

When you see examples of persistence by the characters in TV programs, motion pictures, or stories, call it to your child’s attention and use the word, “persisting” as you discuss the behavior. Share with your child examples of how you persist to be successful in your work.

## 2. MANAGING IMPULSIVITY

*“The sign of intelligent people is their ability to control emotions by the application of reason.”*

Marya Mannes

Successful people have a sense of deliberativeness. They know how to monitor their own impulses and resist jumping to conclusions. Often children blurt the first idea that comes to mind, shout out an answer, start to work without fully understanding directions, or make immediate value judgments about an idea—criticizing or praising it before considering its pros and cons. They may take the first suggestion given or accept the first idea that comes to mind rather than considering alternatives and consequences of several possible directions.

Help your children learn to manage their impulses by asking them to explain rules before beginning a task or game, talking over a plan for solving a problem, exploring alternative problem solving strategies, and considering consequences of actions before beginning.

## 3. LISTENING TO OTHERS— WITH UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY

*“If there is any secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from his angle as well as from your own.”*

Henry Ford

Successful people spend an immense amount of time and energy listening. They empathize with and strive to understand other people’s points of view. Being able to paraphrase another person’s ideas, detecting indicators of their feelings or emotions, accurately expressing another person’s concepts, emotions, and problems— all are indications of listening behavior.

Some children ridicule, laugh at, or put down each other’s ideas. They are unable to build upon, consider the merits of, or operate on another person’s ideas. You will know if your child is

getting better at listening when he or she can attend to another person, demonstrate an understanding of and empathize with another person’s idea or feeling by paraphrasing it accurately, building upon it, clarifying it, or giving an example of it. When your child can say, “Peter’s idea is... but Sarah’s idea is...,” or “Let’s try Shelley’s idea and see if it works,” or “Let me show you how Gina solved the problem, then I’ll show you how I solved it,” then you know they are listening to and understanding others’ ideas and feelings.

You can help by asking, “What did your friend think (feel) when...?” or “I wonder why (s)he would say something like that?” or “If you were Bobby, how do you think he would feel?”

## 4. THINKING FLEXIBLY

*“Soften the rigidities within yourself and the universe will give you strength and vigor.”*

Arabic Proverb

Successful people consider alternative points of view. Sometimes children think that THEIR way to carry out a project or solve a problem seems to be the ONLY way. They may decide that THEIR answer is the only correct answer. They are more interested in knowing whether their answer is correct, rather than being challenged to find other answers. They avoid ambiguous situations and have a need for certainty rather than tolerating doubt. Their minds are made up and they resist being influenced by reasoning that contradicts their beliefs.

As children become more flexible in their thinking they consider another person’s point of view or rationale. They can generate many, varied, and original ideas or possibilities, and can evaluate the merits and consequences of two or more courses of action. When making decisions they will often use such words as “however,” “on the other hand,” or “If you look at it another way...” They change their mind in light of convincing data, argument, or rationale.

Discuss with your child how thinking flexibly aids your success in your profession or career and describe how you handle situations when working with others who are not flexible.

## 5. THINKING ABOUT THEIR THINKING ("METACOGNITION")

*"I cannot always control what goes on outside. But I can always control what goes on inside."* Wayne Dyer

Successful people are aware of themselves—their own thoughts, actions, and values and their effects on others. They monitor their own thinking while they are working and modify their plans or actions as necessary. Often children are unaware of their own thinking while they are thinking. They seldom plan for, reflect on, or evaluate the quality of their own thinking. When asked, "How did you solve that problem?" or "How did you reach that decision?" they may reply, "I don't know, I just did it." They are unable to describe the steps and sequences they are using before, during, and after their work on a task or problem. They cannot transform into words the visual images they held in their mind.

You can determine if your children are becoming more aware of their own thinking if they are able to describe what goes on in their head when they think. When asked, they can describe what they know and what they need to know, what information is lacking, and their plans for producing those data. They can describe their plan of action before they begin to solve a problem. They can list the steps and tell where they are in the sequence of a problem-solving strategy; they can trace the pathways and blind alleys they took on the road to a problem solution.

You can help your child by using "thinking words" such as compare, analyze, predict, classify, and conclude. Invite him or her to describe the thinking skills and strategies they plan to use before performing a task. As they

are working on a project or solving a problem ask them "Where are you now in your strategy?" "What do you still need to do?" "What information are you seeking?" When the task is completed, ask them to reflect on their thought processes: "What worked for you?" or "What would you do differently next time?"

## 6. STRIVING FOR ACCURACY AND PRECISION

*"You go back to the gym and you just do it again and again until you get it right."*

Arnold Schwarzenegger

Successful people appreciate and strive for correctness, elegance, fidelity, and quality in a product. Children, however, are often careless when completing work. Being anxious to finish so they may go on to other things, they seem to feel little inclination to reflect upon the accuracy of their work, to contemplate their precision or to take pride in their accomplishments. Speed of completion surpasses their desire for quality.

You may observe your children's growing desire for accuracy as they take time to check over their tests and homework assignments, as they grow more conscientious about precision, clarity, and perfection. They go back over the rules by which they were to abide, the models and visions they were to follow, and the criteria they were to employ to confirm that their finished product matches exactly. They demonstrate personal pride in their work and they do not settle for "just doing the minimum" that's required to complete the task. Help them by discussing and guiding them in setting standards: "If you were to do a really excellent job cleaning up your room, what will it look like?" Don't be too quick to correct your children's papers or homework for them. You might simply say, "You have three errors on this page. You find them!"

## 7. QUESTIONING AND PROBLEM POSING

*"You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions."* Naguib Mahfouz

One of the distinguishing characteristics between humans and other forms of life is our inclination and ability to FIND problems to solve. Children often depend on others to solve problems, to find answers, and to ask questions for them. They sometimes are reluctant to ask questions for fear of displaying ignorance.

Over time, we want to observe a shift from parents asking questions and posing problems toward the child asking questions and finding problems for themselves. Furthermore, the types of questions children ask should change and become more complex and profound. A child may request data to support another person's conclusions and assumptions: "What evidence do you have.....?" or "How do you know that's true?" will increasingly be heard. You will hear him or her pose more hypothetical problems characterized by "what-if" questions: "What do you think would happen IF.....?" or "IF that is true, then what might happen if.....?"

We want children to be alert to and recognize discrepancies and phenomena in their environment and to inquire into their causes: "Why do cats purr?" "How high can birds fly?" "Why does the hair on my head grow so fast, but the hair on my arms and legs grows so slowly?" or "What are some alternate solutions to international conflicts other than wars?"

Before a trip to the market, when reading a story, while traveling on a family vacation, or when working on a homework assignment, ask your child, "What questions will you be asking yourself?" "What is it you want to know?" "What questions does this raise for you?" or "What are some new questions you might want to ask yourself to learn more about this topic?"



## 8. APPLYING PAST KNOWLEDGE TO NEW SITUATIONS

*"I've never made a mistake. I've only learned from experience."*

Thomas A. Edison

The ultimate purpose of learning is to profit from one's experience. When successful people encounter problems or complex new challenges, one of the first things they ask themselves is "What do I already know about this?" "Where have I encountered a problem like this before?" or "What strategies helped me in the past that I can apply to this new challenge?" Yet we find that while children can pass tests in school mathematics, for example, they often have difficulty deciding whether to buy six items for \$2.39 or seven for \$2.86 at the supermarket.

Too often children begin each new task as if it were being approached for the very first time. Parents are often dismayed when they invite their child to recall how they dealt with a similar challenge previously and the child doesn't remember. It's as if they never heard of it before, even though they had the same type of task recently. It is as if each experience is a separate event that has no relationship to anything that came before or that comes afterward.

Children can be observed growing in this ability as they are heard to say, "This reminds me of..." or "This is just like the time when I..." They explain what they are doing now in making references to previous experiences. They call upon their store of knowledge and experience as sources of data to support theories to explain, or processes to respond to each new challenge.

When you observe your child using learnings from school to deal with opportunities, problems, or challenges at home, you know your child is applying new skills. For example, you may see increased interest in school, more planning in their use of time and finances, better organization of their room and their belongings, or the ability to use previously learned skills

and resources for research on new projects.

When a task has been completed, ask your child to apply their knowledge to the future: "If you were to design a new..." "What would it be like if..." "Where else would you use this information..." "In what other situations could you apply this..."

## 9. THINKING AND COMMUNICATING WITH CLARITY AND PRECISION

*"True eloquence consists of saying all that should be said, and that only."*

Francois de La Rochefoucauld

Language and thinking are closely entwined. Successful people use specific terminology, refrain from over-generalizing, and support their assumptions with valid data. When you hear vague, fuzzy language, you detect vague, fuzzy thinking. Some children's language is confused and imprecise. They describe objects or events with such non-specific words as "weird," "nice," or "O.K." Names of objects are such as "stuff," "junk," and "things." Their sentences are punctuated with "ya' know," "er," and "uh."

As a parent you will need to be alert to vagueness in language and help your child become more specific by clarifying:

*When you hear your child say... Help your child become more specific by saying...*

*"You NEVER listen to me." "Never?" "Never ever?"*

*"Everybody has one." "Everybody?" "Who, exactly?"*

*"THINGS go better with..." "Which things specifically?"*

*"Things GO better with..." "Go? Go—how specifically?"*

*"Things go BETTER with..." "Better than what?"*

*"The teachers..." "Which teachers?"*

*"I want them to UNDERSTAND..."*

*"What exactly will they be doing if they understand..."*

*"This cereal is better" "Better than what?"*

*"THEY won't let me..." "Who is 'they'?"*

*"The other kids..." "Which other kids?"*

*"I want him to be nice" "Nice? How, specifically, should he be nice?"*

As children's language becomes more precise, you will hear them using more descriptive words to distinguish attributes. They will more frequently use correct names and labels. They will spontaneously provide criteria for their value judgments describing why they think one product is better than another. They will speak in complete sentences, voluntarily provide supportive evidence for their ideas, elaborate, clarify, and define their terms. Their oral and written language will become more concise, descriptive, and coherent.

## 10. GATHERING DATA THROUGH ALL SENSES

*"Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I'll understand."* Native American Proverb

All information gets into the brain through the sensory pathways: ears, eyes, skin, nose, and tongue. Successful people realize that to learn and know something, in a strong sense, they must experience it in some personal way. To know a wine it must be drunk; to know a role it must be acted; to know a game it must be played; to know a dance it must be moved; to know a goal it must be envisioned.

When sensory pathways are open, alert, and acute, they absorb more information from the environment than those whose pathways are withered,

immune, and oblivious to sensory stimuli.

You will observe your children using all their senses as they touch, smell, and listen to various objects in their environment. (You've most likely noticed how often young children try to put things in their mouth.) They will request a story or rhyme be read again and again. They will act out roles and "be" the thing: a father, a flatbed, or a fish. "Let me see, let me see," "I want to feel it," "Let me try it," "Let me hold it..." they will plead.

As they mature, you may observe them express many ways of thinking, producing, and solving problems by use of the senses: making observations, gathering data, experimenting, manipulating, scrutinizing, identifying variables, interviewing, visualizing, role playing, illustrating, or model building. Their expressions will use a range and variety of sensory words: "I FEEL like....." "It TOUCHES me." "I HEAR your idea." "It leaves a bad TASTE in my mouth." "Got the PICTURE?"

Help your children hone their powers of perception by engaging in such exercises as:

- **Sight:** Ninety percent of our sensory input comes through our eyes. To improve peripheral vision, have them shift their eyes from right to left several times as fast as they can without moving their head. Have them try to focus on ten different objects in ten seconds by scanning around the room. Name the objects in order in which they saw them.
- **Touch:** Our largest sense organ is our skin. With their eyes closed, have your child feel various textured objects—sandpaper, cotton, silk, steel— and describe what they are feeling.
- **Sound:** While we can't improve our hearing, we can improve our listening. Have your child close his or her eyes and listen to a single sound. This will require them to shut out extraneous

noise. Listen to music, for example and single out one instrument to follow— the bass guitar or the violin.

- **Smell:** Provide various fragrances: perfume, cinnamon, cloves, winter-green, or eucalyptus. Have them describe what they smell.
- **Taste:** Humans taste four basic flavors: sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. With the eyes closed, place a sample of each taste on the tongue: sugar, salt, lemon juice, and vinegar. Have them describe what they taste.



**C**reative  
people are open  
to criticism and  
hold up their  
products for  
others to judge  
and seek  
feedback in an  
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effort to refine  
their technique.

## 11. INGENUITY, ORIGINALITY, INSIGHTFULNESS: CREATIVITY

*"We need people who can read and write. But what we really need is people who can not only read the instructions, but also change them. They need to be able to think outside the lines."* Richard Gurin

"I can't draw," "I was never very good at art," "I can't sing a note." Some people think creative humans are just born that way, that creativity is in their genes and chromosomes. Increasingly we are coming to realize that all human beings have the capacity to generate novel, original, clever or ingenious products, solutions, and techniques— if that capacity is developed.

Successful people are deliberately creative. They try to examine problem solutions differently, examining alternative possibilities from many angles. They tend to project themselves into different roles using analogies, starting with a vision and working backward, imagining that they are the objects being considered. Creative people take risks— they "live on the edge of their competence," testing their limits. Creative people are open to criticism and hold up their products for others to judge and seek feedback in an ever-increasing effort to refine their technique. They constantly strive for greater fluency, elaboration, novelty, perfection, beauty, harmony, and balance.

Children often need help to know how to tap their creative potential. Tools and techniques such as brainstorming, mind-mapping, and metaphorical thinking help to loosen and expand their thinking. Just a few examples include: ask your child to find connections and hidden relationships among two or more unlike objects: "In what ways is gravity like a feather?" Create your own plant and an environment in which it can live. Ask: "How does it feel to be a flat tire?" "How do you think a zero feels?" "Which is crisper, celery or yellow?" "Which is the happiest room in

our house? Why?” Encourage your children to find and use alternate ways to present information or prepare project reports in school (for example, using art, music, video, or dance in addition to or even instead of written papers).

## 12. RESPONDING WITH WONDERMENT AND AWE

*“The most beautiful experience in the world is the experience of the mysterious.”*

Albert Einstein

Recently, a Dutch psychologist tried to figure out what separated chess masters and chess grand masters. He subjected groups in each category to a battery of tests but found that the only difference was that grand masters simply loved chess more. They had more passion and commitment to it. Passion may be the key to creativity. Stimulate your child’s sense of awe and wonder with striking phenomena, intriguing situations, and jaw-dropping experiences. Surround them with beautiful scenes, technological marvels, and science fiction; let their imaginations take flight. Successful people find enjoyment, enthusiasm, and fascination in their work and world. Allow your children free range to explore whatever they are intrigued with— as long as they are experiencing the passion. Invite your children to share their interests— what electrifies and mystifies them. Create a safe home environment, where children feel free to share their fascination, their emotions and their exhilaration. Make it cool to be passionate about something! Share with your child your own fascinations. Allow them to see you enthralled and excited about a problem or discovery and compelled with your own work.

You will want to see your children move not only from an “I CAN” attitude, but also towards an “I ENJOY” feeling. You will want them to request problems to solve, challenging projects in which to engage, and to seek creative challenges of their own on

which to work. Furthermore, you want them to work with increasing independence— without your help or intervention. Such statements as, “Don’t tell me the answer, I can figure it out by myself,” will indicate growing autonomy. We will see them willingly learning throughout a lifetime.

You may observe them communing with the world around them, reflecting on the changing formations of a cloud; being charmed by the opening of a bud; sensing the logical simplicity of mathematical order. They will find beauty in a sunset, intrigue in the geometrics of a spider web, and exhilaration in the iridescence of a hummingbird’s wings.

Their curiosity will become stronger as the problems they encounter become more complex. Their environment will attract their inquiry as their senses capture the rhythm, patterns, shapes, colors, and harmonies of the universe. They will display compassion toward other life forms as they are able to understand the need for protecting their environment; respecting the roles and values of other human beings; and perceiving the delicate worth, uniqueness, and relationships of everything and everyone they encounter. Wonderment, awesomeness, and passion: these are prerequisites for success.

## MODELING

*“Don’t worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you.”*

Robert Fulghum

Imitation and emulation are the most basic forms of learning, and therefore parents realize the importance of their own display of these desirable dispositions in the presence of their children. Thus, in day-to-day family events when problems arise, your children must see you employing the same types of success-building behaviors.

## IN SUMMARY

This list of “Habits of Success” and the conditions that promote them are not meant to be complete.

There are many other habits such as displaying a sense of humor, thinking interdependently, and learning continuously.

As parents, we have great responsibility for instilling these dispositions or habits of mind in our children. We must teach them to value intelligent, creative, and rational action. To do so, however, we must provide the conditions that will nurture these habits. We must believe that ALL children can continue to grow in their ability to behave more intelligently. I believe that we must also have faith that all humans can become increasingly more gifted than they are presently capable of demonstrating! Finally, we must set an example by becoming models of these habits of success ourselves.

*“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”* Aristotle

## RECOMMENDED READING

This article is drawn from the four-book series, *Habits of Mind*, by Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick, published in 2000 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Alexandria, Virginia).

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