

GIVING YOUR CHILD THE EXCELLENCE EDGE

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Introduction



When I taught gifted education for Pinellas County Schools in Florida, I was impressed by the ideals behind the program. They used no standardized curriculum; teachers had the freedom to teach whatever allowed them to fulfill the requirements for student competency. Often as I was teaching, I would be struck with how the strategies I was trying to instill were ones that could easily benefit any student—no matter the level of “giftedness.”

Then, in 1990, a report was generated in response to *Blueprint 2000*, the president’s study of American education. Called the SCANS report, it outlined many areas every child needed to acquire competency to become successful, productive members of society.¹ As I began to incorporate these fundamental areas into my teaching program, I was again amazed to realize not only how easily *every* child could learn and benefit from them, but how *biblical* the basic building blocks of excellence really were.

Yet my greatest realization about the universal importance of these skills didn’t occur until I began raising my own children and I started seeing these concepts changing our lives. It soon became my greatest passion to teach these biblically based concepts to as many children as possible. My mission has become to help parents make the necessary yet simple connections between a child’s success at home, in school, and later out in the world. And because these concepts are based on universal truth, they apply to everyone whether parent or child, student or teacher, Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Gentile.

I am confident that *Giving Your Child the Excellence Edge* will help you take advantage of the intrinsic abilities your child already possesses.

As you walk through these chapters, I think you will realize as I did how revolutionary these simple principles truly are. My humble hope is that you will find the task of guiding your child toward excellence as spiritually rewarding for you as it has been for me.

Since each child will have certain strong and weak areas to focus on, I've designed the material to allow you to pick and choose the skills your child needs most. The activities and action points in each chapter are designed to make encouraging those little minds quick, easy, and enjoyable. A small daily activity is all that's required to give your child the greatest possible chance of achieving every goal he sets in life. As we'll discuss, you have been chosen, for better or worse, as your child's "Life Coach": you must model and practice these skills to encourage the seeds of excellence to grow. You'll also find that teaching these strategies gets easier with practice. I invite you to rediscover the ten skills in this book as the stepping-stones that lead you to successful, productive adulthood.

We *all* want to give our children an excellent life. Passing on these ten basic skills will make *all* the difference.





Your Child's Best Teacher Is You

*“Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.”*

—PROVERBS 1:8

What did you learn in school today?”
“I don’t know.”

“Well, you must have learned something. What did you do: sit around all day and stare at one another?”

“I guess.”

You stare at your son, your hands on your hips. His tired body is slumped down on the couch as he soaks in the cartoons. If you looked at it from his perspective, you might realize he’s actually *trying* to shed all memory of the school day. All you’re asking is for a few words to fill in the details, but to him your interrogation seems like something closer to torture.

On the other hand, what message are you sending your child if you never asked about his school day? Would you be telling him that his education was important to you or that you were interested in what he was learning?

Or would he think you cared as little for what he was learning as he did?

As a teacher, I watched some students agonize over a lower mark than their usual *A*, while others flippantly boasted about getting an *F*. I'd watch in wonder at what must have been going on in the underachieving children's homes. What behaviors and attitudes were they picking up from their parents?

It's a fact that your child learns most of his or her life lessons—including the one on the importance of education—from you. We all sense that this is true, but it is rare to see a parent who really knows it *and* acts on it.

Think about it for a moment: *What has your child learned from you today?*

If your answer is “Hmmm . . .” you're not alone! For most American parents, the thought of adding one more thing to their already-long list of chores is virtually unbearable. But while these strategies can help you provide the very best education for your child, without a daily investment of time, attention, and effort on your part, your child will never pick them up. You must dedicate the time. This book can be a helpful resource when a particular need arises, but ideally you will apply these strategies on a daily basis and begin to see immediate benefits from your investment. As in the area of finances, even a minor investment of time can reap huge dividends when it's properly placed. And while there is no “quick fix,” these tools will help you point your child toward his personal and educational goals.

Helping your child put these strategies to use will foster his long-term success. The only prerequisites are your willingness to try and your ability to keep an open mind.

But I'm Not a Teacher!

Many parents feel inadequate when considering their responsibility to teach their children. Yet educators all speak of the fact that nothing they



teach children in a classroom has nearly the effect of a parent's teaching in the home. If you are a parent, you are a teacher. Think of all the things you've already taught your child: the intricacies of every family, your values and beliefs, what to do or not to do in a given situation. You communicated so many "firsts" to your child—whether you realize it or not. We teach our children both the positive *and* the negative things about life: whom to trust and whom to hate, how to share and how to get your own way, how to help others and how to hurt them. Certainly, other people also contribute to our children's development. But as parents, we are the primary teachers of what this business of living is all about.

Your decision to think about *what* you say and do each day makes it easy to see *why* your children say and do what they do each day.

Setting Your Sights

Before we rush into making "achievers" out of our children, it's important to first consider our goals. These 10 skills will be powerful tools for pointing your child toward the bull's-eye—the fulfillment of goals in her life. Yet if your "bull's-eye" doesn't match hers, you may be in for a bit of a struggle.

Your idea of success is probably different from your child's, at least right now. But rather than simply working to bring his idea of success in line with yours, ask yourself, *For whom am I really doing this, and why?* Government reports on education have simple enough goals: to develop a working system for creating productive members of society. Is that your goal, or is yours more personal, based on a deeper belief system? Do your children know your goals for them (or even their goals for themselves, for that matter)?

It is likely you will need to discuss this as a family and commit to agreeing on a few basic goals together before you start applying these tools. We'll discuss this further in chapter three.



Where Should My Child Go to School?

Another obvious but important consideration is what type of school your child should attend. The debate surrounding school choice rages on. My purpose is not to tell you which is best for your child. But to set your children up to succeed in life, finding the proper school for them is very important. If your child is not thriving in his current environment, you may need to consider a more suitable choice. Whether it's a public or private school, a charter or magnet school, or even homeschooling, your choices are critical to their development.

Actually, the fact that parents even *have* a choice is largely a new phenomenon. Over recent decades, more and more options have become available, such as more affordable private schools and the emergence of charter and magnet schools. Of course, having this many choices makes it important to check into each option thoroughly before making a decision. In the end, remember that the decision is never set in stone. You can always reconsider if it isn't working for your child.

Consider some basic advantages and disadvantages of the different schooling options:

Public Schools

Public education offers traditional schooling at its best—*and* its worst. Yet for many families, this remains the best choice. The quality of any public school depends primarily upon three factors: the dedication of the teachers, the involvement of the parents, and the availability of funds. The first two carry the most weight. Even with a shortage of funds students can excel. Many inner city or small rural schools prove this. By the same token, there are some schools in very wealthy districts that are producing mediocre test scores. As we know, the battle is won in the classroom, one student at a time.



Do you or your child remember a favorite teacher? What was special about him or her? Did he have an uncommon concern for students? Would you say she loved her job? How was the communication with parents—was it regular or infrequent? Was the teacher innovative, teaching in a way that was encouraging and inspiring? Did he take the time to get to know the children well?

Obviously, it doesn't take private funding for schools to offer a good education. When teachers find fulfillment in their job, it makes up for many other things a school might lack.

Advantages

1. Public schools are good at reaching and helping the below-average student.
2. Public schools are driven by common standards and goals.
3. Public schools are free.
4. Public schools offer students a variety of social experiences based upon diverse populations.

Disadvantages

1. Public schools are overcrowded.
2. Public schools often lack funds.
3. Public schools do not effectively address the needs of gifted students. They are set up to care for the needs of the below-average student and increasingly the average student. Minimum standards are in place.
4. Public schools have more student safety concerns than the others.
5. Public schools can be more “forward-thinking” than many parents might prefer.



6. As is common in politics, “reform” can often mean a previously failed approach repackaged under a new name.

Private Schools

Private schooling is the oldest form of institutionalized education in the United States. When our nation was formed, formal schooling was privatized: It was only for older children (12 to 14 years old), whose parents could afford both the tuition and the shortage of that child’s work on the farm. Today, private schools are available to a wider range of students, but they still carry the high price tag. Scholarships are usually available on a limited basis. For the most part, private schools do a good job of stretching funds to attract less affluent parents who have become dissatisfied with poor public school programs.

Even so, private schools are prone to special problems. Some schools will enroll students who have been asked to leave a public school for discipline reasons, effectively making them into a reformatory school for some. And recent salary boosts in public schools have wooed many good teachers away from struggling private institutions. Even with regular tuition increases, a private school teacher’s salary often stays the same, which may account for the high rate of uncertified teachers in private schools. Still, private schooling is preferable for many reasons.

Advantages

1. Private schools are often church-affiliated and may support your desire to impart faith in your child’s education.
2. Private schools typically have a higher level of parental involvement.
3. A community atmosphere can encourage greater solidarity and discipline among students.



4. Accelerated curricula for gifted students is usually offered.
5. Although some private schools can be overcrowded, they generally have a smaller class size.

Disadvantages

1. Although private schools must undergo an accreditation process, some schools (and teachers) have not earned accreditation.
2. Private schools that have earned accreditation will be more expensive.
3. Problem students sent from public schools may derail opportunities for creativity and classroom innovation.
4. Parents must often transport their own children to school.
5. If a private school is church-affiliated, it may support a denomination with differing doctrinal views from the parents.

Charter/Magnet Schools

Charter and magnet schools are public schools that are designed to meet an identified need in the community.

The newest of available schooling choices, charter schools are actually public schools that are funded by businesses or communities who want the highest level of involvement in their children's education; many are run more like a private school than a typical public school. A charter school, then, may not be run by educators or government, but by industries. While the teachers and administration usually choose the curriculum, the typical supporter is a wealthy parent. In many cases, a group of parents begins a charter school to target a specific population of children, whether it be gifted, at-risk, artistic, or low-income students.

Magnet schools are similar, but with one major difference: They too serve a specified population, but usually as a school-within-a-school



program. For example, International Baccalaureate programs (IB) may be offered at a public high school and students interact only with other students in the program. Many magnet schools exist entirely on their own funding. They almost always have a waiting list, and some have even begun deciding enrollment with a lottery system.

Advantages

1. Because they are publicly funded, there is no tuition cost.
2. They typically offer a smaller class size.
3. They may target a specific need of your child.
4. They allow for greater parental input.
5. Due to high parent involvement and visibility, they may have fewer disciplinary problems and safety concerns than both private and public schools.

Disadvantages

1. They may not be conveniently located, and the parent is usually responsible for transportation.
2. Waiting lists can be very long.
3. With such a high level of parental involvement, disagreements can sometimes disrupt programs.

Homeschooling

It is believed that homeschooled children make up approximately 3 percent of the school-age population.¹ Recent high profile studies have thrust homeschooling into the mainstream culture. The studies are showing that a homeschooling parent's love and dedication far outweigh their lack of certification. Not only is one-on-one attention better for children, the school day can be much more efficient, and therefore shorter,



opening up a myriad of other opportunities that are unavailable in other settings.

Home school is able to combine a variety of approaches to meet the individual needs of the child. And with the growing participation in homeschool co-ops, socialization is becoming greater and more diverse all the time.

Of course, as this choice grows in popularity, its proponents are splintering into factions of educational philosophies. The “unschoolers” utilize many different types of curriculum, while the traditionalists try to mimic a “school-at-home” approach as much as possible.

Homeschooling is not for every child. Nor is it the best choice for every family every year. It can be a difficult situation to “work where you sleep” for both parent and child. The sacrifices can be great. But its proponents say that the benefits of homeschooling outweigh the sacrifice on a daily basis.²

Advantages

1. Homeschooling best meets the individual learning needs of children.
2. Homeschooling can create or strengthen the family bond.
3. Parents can set their own schedule and choose their own curricula.
4. Prestigious colleges and universities seek out and welcome home-schooled students.

Disadvantages

1. Parental burnout can frequently occur in the absence of a strong support system.
2. The financial sacrifice of changing to a one-income family is too great for many.



3. The choice to homeschool is still criticized and questioned by many.

Get Involved!

You don't have to be your child's actual schoolteacher to be involved in his education. But it will take more than volunteering in a classroom one hour a week to have a real impact. Research shows that parental involvement in a child's education is directly linked to that child's success. Yet according to a recent study made by the U.S. Department of Education, 91 percent of teachers say that lack of parental involvement is still a problem.³

What parents must realize is that their involvement in their child's education is as important as any other area of their lives and requires as much attention. Just as we must be active, informed participants in health care today, we must also be active, informed advocates of our children's education. This doesn't happen if your level of involvement is to drop your child off at school and assume all is well until you pick her up each afternoon. To be *informed* you must get *involved*. Here are three primary ways to get involved in your child's education:

Become Aware

There are many things you can do to become aware of your child's educational experience. Get the school's perspective—not just your child's—on what is being taught. Read everything that comes home with your child, from their homework to the school newsletter. Check out the school's Web site. Attend PTA meetings. Join a school advisory committee, if one exists. Set up conferences with all your child's teachers *before* a problem crops up. Engage your child in conversation about school at a time when he is more likely to talk about it—at bedtime or in the car.



Make the effort! When you do, you'll never be able to say, "I didn't know," or "I wasn't aware."

Be Visible

Most parents come to school only for special events and then are never seen again. But you know you're involved when you walk into the front office and the secretary knows you by name! In order for that familiarity to take place, you must volunteer some of your time at the school. And when you do, volunteer somewhere other than your own child's classroom! Join the PTA and help to set up events or fundraisers. Thank those involved with your child in a tangible way. Food works wonders, especially sweets! If you're visible, when a problem arises, teachers and staff will be more likely to contact you right away. And if you're approachable, they won't hesitate to include you in the inside information.

Be Your Child's Advocate

The word *advocate* can mean so many things: a backer, a fighter, a follower, a patron, a proponent, a savior, a spokesman, or a sponsor. But each of these synonyms implies an active role. When you are someone's "advocate," you believe in them and their message to such an extent that you deliberately and actively promote their interests and protect their reputation. Our children are not capable of being their own advocates. It's up to us to *back* their pursuits, *fight* for their rights, *follow* their lead in how they learn, be their *patron* by supporting their talents, be a *proponent* for their needs, *save* them from dangerous situations, *speak* up on their behalf, and *sponsor* their efforts at achieving success. They, in turn, will learn to do the same for themselves and their children.

Remember that in every school, no matter which one you choose, there are things that will go wrong. It's the nature of life! Yet if you stay aware, make yourself visible, and become an advocate for your children, you will



have the necessary tools to address any problem that might arise. And from your efforts, your child will learn what living in this world requires.

Isn't that the real goal?

Choosing a Particular School

As time goes on, choosing a school is only getting harder. Gone are the days when you just enrolled in the neighborhood school with everyone else, no decisions to make, no responsibilities, no need to check things out. Today, it is important to remember that *more* choices don't always mean *better* choices. But how can we wade through the process without getting bogged down by the potential problems?

Before enrolling your child in any particular school, ask yourself the following questions:

- *What kind of person will this school encourage my child to become?*
- *What are the major academic, social, and emotional needs of my child? Will his various needs be met in this school's environment on a short-term basis? On a long-term basis?*
- *Will the atmosphere of this school cultivate or hinder his growth?*
- *How much input can I have as a parent in this school?*
- *What are my options if I disagree with the decisions made at this school?*
- *What level of involvement is needed by my child to succeed? Does this school support or encourage that level of involvement?*
- *What does this school expect from parents?*
- *What do I expect from the teachers in this school? Are my expectations reasonable?*

You may have to do some searching to find the answers, but it's worth the effort. What and how much our children learn is greatly dependent upon what we provide for them with our time and effort. It



can be humbling to realize that the buck stops with you, but don't let the responsibility of the task intimidate you. Schools know the parents who are involved, and they listen to them.

So be encouraged! You're taking the first step toward giving your child the best education he can have.





Coaching Your Child's Achievement

Remember: Your role is to be the *coach* of your child's achievement—not the taskmaster! If you did nothing specific to teach your child to apply these strategies, you could still raise a successful child simply by effectively modeling the strategies. Work on your *own* understanding and implementation of these strategies first: This is the most important part of teaching your child to apply them for himself.

Your family provides the best learning environment your child will ever have. You have a greater stake in your child's future than any school will, because you love your children more than any teacher could. Don't target too many areas of improvement in your child before you have dealt with them in yourself. Chances are, if your child lacks a specific skill or ability, *you do as well*. If you find this to be the case, tackle them one at a time and learn the new skill together. That will make it fun and inspiring.

As the ultimate coach of your child's success, you must provide not just rules to follow, but competencies to apply. Always lead with love, patience,

and understanding, and always encourage your children to persevere. And remember: Just as a good coach models a skill by first showing the player how to do it, and then supervises the practice before the first game, you must model and supervise the development of life skills in your children. You are their life coach—and the game is the game of life.



Appendix



Parents' Multiple Intelligence Inventory

It has been suggested that there are at least seven different “types” of intelligence.¹ Depending on your background and age, you will have developed in more of these than others. This list should help you determine your strengths and weaknesses.

Check each statement that applies.

1. Linguistic Intelligence

- Books are very important to me.
- I can hear words in my head before I read, speak, or write them down.
- I get more out of listening to the radio or a spoken word cassette than I do from television or films.
- I enjoy word games like *Scrabble*, *Anagrams*, or *Password*.
- I enjoy entertaining others or myself with tongue twisters, non-sense rhymes, or puns.
- Other people sometimes have to stop and ask me to explain the meaning of the words I use in my writing and speaking.
- English, social studies, and history were easier for me in school than math and science.
- When I drive down a freeway, I pay more attention to the words written on billboards than I do to the scenery.
- My conversation includes frequent references to things that I've read or heard.



- ___ I've written something recently that I was particularly proud of or that earned me recognition from others.

2. Logical/Mathematical Intelligence

- ___ I can easily compute numbers in my head.
- ___ Math and/or science were among my favorite subjects in school.
- ___ I enjoy playing games or solving brainteasers that require logical thinking.
- ___ I like to set up little "what-if" experiments. (For example, "What if I double the amount of water I give my rosebush each week?")
- ___ My mind searches for patterns, regularities, or logical sequences in things.
- ___ I believe that almost everything has a rational explanation.
- ___ I sometimes think in clear, abstract, wordless, imageless concepts.
- ___ I like finding logical flaws in things that people say and do at home and work.
- ___ I feel more comfortable when something has been measured, categorized, analyzed, or quantified in some way.

3. Spatial Intelligence

- ___ I often see clear visual images when I close my eyes.
- ___ I'm sensitive to color.
- ___ I frequently use a camera or camcorder to record what I see around me.
- ___ I enjoy doing jigsaw puzzles, mazes, and other visual puzzles.
- ___ I have vivid dreams at night.
- ___ I can generally find my way around unfamiliar territory.
- ___ I like to draw or doodle.



Child's Multiple Intelligence Inventory

Help your child check all that apply, then add up the check marks to rate his strength in that category.²

Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence

- I enjoy telling stories and jokes.
- I have a good memory for trivia.
- I enjoy word games such as *Scrabble* and other puzzles.
- I read books just for fun.
- I am a good speller (most of the time).
- In an argument I tend to use put-downs or sarcasm.
- I like talking and writing about my ideas.
- If I have to memorize something, I create a rhyme or saying to help me remember.
- If something breaks and won't work, I read the instruction book.
- For a group presentation I prefer to do the writing and library research.

Logical/Mathematical Intelligence

- I really enjoy math class.
- I like logical math puzzles or brainteasers.
- I find solving math problems to be fun.
- If I have to memorize something, I tend to place events in a logical order.
- I like to find out how things work.
- I enjoy computer and math games.
- I love playing chess, checkers, or *Monopoly*.
- In an argument, I try to find a fair and logical solution.



Notes



Introduction

1. “*What Work Requires of Schools*,” SCANS report, National Technical Information Service (NTIS), Technology Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, Springfield, Va., 1991.

Chapter One

1. According to Dr. Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, there were approximately 1.5 to 1.9 million children (grades K-12) home-educated in the United States during the 2000-2001 school year.
2. For more information on homeschooling, see Vicki’s books, *The ABCs of Homeschooling* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001) and *The Organized Homeschooler* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001).
3. Schools and Staffing Survey, U.S. Department of Education, 1995.

Chapter Three

1. Linda Kavelin Popov, *The Family Virtues Guide* (New York: Plume, 1997), 105.
2. Ibid., 225.

Chapter Four

1. Quoted in *Teaching Creative Behavior*, Shallcross Doris (New York: Bearly Limited, 1985), foreword.

