Help Teach Your Children

The 21st century college, career and life skills your kids need, but probably don't have

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Editor: Oliver Branch
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Dedication

To those kids – on the downside of advantage – who somehow manage to discover their potential and realize that they can do and be whatever they dream about doing and being.

And to the parents, families, guardians, teachers, coaches, neighbors and mentors of those kids who help them along the way.

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Acknowledgements

Help Teach Your Children, the initiative, would have idled as a "good idea" were it not for the encouraging support, interest and feedback I received from parents, educators, home-schoolers, journalists, authors, business consultants, professional service providers and the media throughout North America.

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Help Teach Your Children, the Solo Book, would never have materialized were it not for the creative, collaborative and constructive support and direction of Tony Boisvert.

Thanks very much to all of you!

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Foreword

Help Teach Your Children was never meant to be a book; it was simply a message; an outreach to parents to let them know that helping their kids with their homework is no longer enough; a means of getting the word out that things have changed in Education. Not because a group of scholars and academics decided it was time to test a new methodology, but because employers and college administrators around the country started vocalizing some real complaints.

You see, our American kids have been graduating from high school with deficiencies – even if they can name every U.S. President, dissect a frog, conjugate a verb and graph a linear equation, our kids are going to college and joining the workforce with some severe deficiencies – not in what they know, but in (among many other things) their abilities to think, relate, cooperate and innovate.

As a veteran book Publisher and Editorial Director with a strong concentration in K-12 and college textbooks, I found this intriguing. As I delved into the issues a bit further, I discovered that in 2009, a new set of curriculum standards was developed as part of the U.S. Department of Education's Education reform. These standards addressed our students' deficiencies in many areas – but what resonated most with me was the area identified as "learning and innovation" skills, or "life skills".

It occurred to me that if parents would embrace the importance and impact of these skills in their adult lives, then surely they, like me, would see the advantage these skills would give their kids throughout their lives. Furthermore, since the skills are "soft", I was pretty sure, with a little guidance and a head start, parents could readily accept them as important and begin teaching them to their kids right alongside the other "golden rules" – honesty, respect, hard work, kindness, etc.

I compiled research, talked with kids, parents and educators from all regions and walks of life, and created some simple life-skill development activities for parents to do with their kids at home. I formed Help Teach

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Your Children as a public service initiative and launched a national media campaign as the vehicle for delivering this message. My goal was first to find out if my thinking was valid or (as has often been the case) really out there. My second goal was to inspire parents to engage in this notion and try to develop these skills in their kids at home. My third goal was to help show them how.

The response that I received from the media, educators, and all types of parents and guardians – working, stay-at-home, single and home-schoolers – satisfied my curiosity and motivated me to continue. I was quickly convinced I had a valid message to share, which is what I have been doing since 2010. However, recent feedback has begun making it very clear that Help Teach Your Children would better serve its "subscribers" if the bits and pieces of information I've been circulating were compiled into a guidebook.

So, this book that was never intended to be a book evolved from emails, Press Releases and blog posts that have been sent and posted over the past two years with one intent – to help parents help teach their children the skills they really need in order to create, pursue, discover and accomplish anything – in school, work and life.

Rebecca J. Ensign

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Help teach your children…just hearing those words can be a bit overwhelming, right?

While that's understandable, before you roll your eyes and say, "Oh yeah, sure, like I have time for this …" please notice that the first two words of this outreach and initiative are ***Help teach***. Then, please read this Introduction. It's presented to help you understand exactly what, why and how you really can help teach your children … painlessly, without having to spend any extra time or money.

Note: Throughout this book, the word "parent" is used to represent any adult who is either the primary care-giver of a child in the home, or one who spends a significant amount of time, one on one, with a child and has an interest in guiding, supporting and motivating that child. A "parent", for this purpose, can be a grandparent, aunt or uncle, older sibling, coach, pastor, or neighbor. So, even if your children are grown, the material in this book can be applied to any child you know and care about.

What should you help teach your children?

On June 1, 2009, a U.S. Education initiative, known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative was adopted in an effort to provide a "clear and consistent understanding of what students are expected to learn so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them." [Source: "Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts"; achieve.org]

[Notice that the initiative mentioned teachers and parents!]

This Education initiative was the result of a study conducted in 2004 that revealed that both employers and colleges are demanding more of high school graduates. So, in order to make American K-12 students more college and career ready,

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and to receive Federal grants for incorporating curriculums that would support this goal, states had to adopt "internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the global work place."

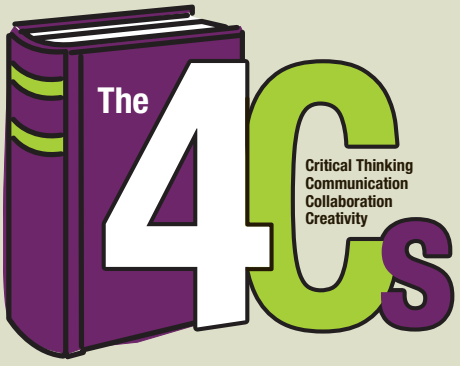
The first step was to require the development of a rigorous curriculum that focused not only on the core subjects – Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies/History, etc, but also the fundamental learning and innovation skills. These learning and innovation skills are the skills that have been identified as necessary to accelerate 21st century students' abilities to meet the new rigorous standards and become globally college and career ready.

You studied the core subjects, so while you may be rusty, they aren't foreign to you. But do you have any idea what is meant by "learning and innovation skills"?

Since June 1, 2009, have you received any material from your kids' teachers or school administrators regarding these skills and how you can help teach them, since as a parent, you've been included in that responsibility?

Probably not! So, if you don't even know what they are, how can you help teach them to your children, as prescribed in the original initiative?

You need not be in the dark any more. The learning and innovation skills, also associated with career and life skills, are referred to as the "4 C's" and they are – Critical thinking; Communication; Collaboration; Creativity.



Why should you help teach your children the "4 C's"?

In order for teachers to incorporate 21st century skills development into daily lesson plans, they are required to shift away from the "traditional methods of teaching." While that sounds like an ideal plan in theory, in practice it is not immediately possible.

In the past few years, since the adoption of the National Common Core Standards, how much shift have you noticed in how your kids' are taught in school? Do they still have homework in the form of Worksheets, textbook exercises, reading assignments, and journal writing? Do they take tests periodically? Chances are your answers are yes. So, with the exception of more homework and an accelerated pace, how much has really shifted in the way your kids are being taught?

This is not the fault of teachers, curriculum developers or school administrators. It is simply feasibility and logistics. There is not much time or resources left during the school day for consistent, interactive activities and exercises designed exclusively to stimulate skills like the 4 C's.

You see, like a muscle, each of the 4 C's can be "exercised" – not through memorization or testing, but through stimulating dialogue and one on one engagement, which is the focus of this book.

This is where parents come in!

The 4 C's are the foundation for how students learn, how well they perform in school and how ready they will be for the world – regardless of the path they take after graduation. Yet, because they are more "intangible" than Math or Science, these skills can't be adequately practiced and measured in a traditional classroom environment.

Developing these skills starts with awareness and perception, which originate uniquely in each and every student (or person, for that matter).

A teacher can't possibly be right in front of each student when his or her 4 C's "light bulb" goes off – but a parent can. And this is why you are most capable of teaching them to your children.

How can you help teach your children these life skills?

As mentioned above, the National Common Core Standards initiative requires teachers to shift away from the traditional methods of teaching. But shift to what? In very simple, but accurate, terms, the shift requires engaging in dialogue, discussion and debate. We all know what happens in a classroom when a discussion is prompted. One or two students participate and dominate while the rest of the class rides along until the bell rings.

At home, there is no bell and there is no one else to answer a question for a kid when a parent asks him or her directly.

As you will see throughout this book, all of these activities and their results stem from interacting with your kid, primarily through conversations. Each of the 4 C's – Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration, yes, even Creativity – can be acquired through one on one, interactive engagement with your kid.

This book is your primer; it will get you going. In a variety of ways, you will be shown why, what and when to look for clues and ask questions and how to do so in the context of each of the 4 C skills your child needs in order to compete and succeed – locally and globally, in and out of the classroom, during and after the K-12 years.

So please, proceed to Part I to get more familiar with these skills - what they are and how they apply to everyday situations. And then, dive into Part II. The directed activities in Part II are presented by seasons of the year to make it easier for you to "introduce" and practice this new

form of homework in a current, relatable context. But, you can proceed with these activities in any order.

Give these suggestions, exercises and activities a try. If you truly make a dedicated effort to accept the method and purpose of the "Help Teach Your Children" message and the role you play in making sure your kids acquire the 4 C's "life skills", you will soon be flying solo …you'll start recognizing and devising all sorts of everyday opportunities to help your kids acquire and apply these skills. And, you may just find that you're faring a bit better yourself – at work, in your relationships, and in life in general.

All of the activities in this book - and their results - stem from interacting with your kid, primarily through conversations.

Part 1

What are the 4 C's and why are they best taught and learned at home?

What are the 4 C's and why are they best taught and learned at home?

In simple terms, the 4 C's are part of the 21st century skills that have been identified and incorporated into the National Common Core Education Standards. They are the skills that are deemed to have the greatest impact on affecting a 21st century student's global college and career readiness. But, more immediately, these are the skills that provide the basis for becoming adept in each of the 4 core subjects: Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies/History. Not to mention that a command of these skills lends a person (kids and adults!) a tremendous advantage in all of life's endeavors.

While there are a variety of essential 21st century categories and skills that have been identified, the ones that parents can most affect are termed "The 4 C's" which compose the Learning and Innovation category. The "4 C's" are:

Critical thinking / Problem solving

Receiving, accumulating, and weeding through information or input, (i.e., gleaning through a pile of stuff) and then being able to determine what to absorb and what to reject in order to form an opinion or conclusion, take an action, affect an outcome, or discover a new piece of knowledge.

Communication

Conveying information; it takes place when three things are present – a sender, a message and a recipient. The key to effective communication is how the message is "packaged", "transmitted" and understood. If all three aspects aren't aligned according to the sender's intent, effective communication has failed, which occurs every day in every circumstance, especially in the classroom.

Collaboration / Cooperation

Assuming and sharing responsibility by compromising, remaining flexible, adapting and working effectively with diverse people or dynamics in order to achieve a goal. Simply put, working with others to accomplish something.

Creativity / Innovation

Refers to the origination of any new thing that makes some kind of contribution or has some form of value. A creation could be a product, a solution, a painting, a recipe, an idea, or a poem. Applications of creativity are relevant in a wide range of disciplines and fields, among them, psychology, education, economics and technology. Basically, creative skills and creative individuals are as diverse as their applications. But all share one thing - the ability to originate something new, novel and unique.

These four skills are attributes that everyone possesses to some degree – and everyone can develop even further – with a little exercise. And, the younger, the better. Furthermore, these skills can be – and need to be – developed as deeply as possible at home, during everyday activities, exclusive from doing homework or studying for a test.

So, how are you possibly going to do that? Believe it or not, it's not that difficult. This kind of "exercising" does not have to pull you away from any of your other daily or weekly family activities, commitments or obligations. It starts by assessing your kid when he or she is doing whatever it is he or she is doing at any time.

To discover for yourself if your kid possesses these skills and why they are best taught at home, you must first figure out a way to spend some focused time – one on one – with each of your kids.

This "focused time" can be any time of day or night. You just need to talk to, or observe your kid. In the midst of these interactions, ask yourself if he or she is any of the following:

A critical thinker?

Does he or she form opinions independently or "assume" others' opinions? If given two clues in a "mystery", can your kid form a theory as to what may have happened? When given options, does your kid knee-jerk-react, or think each option through to arrive at the best overall decision?

EXAMPLE

Your son's Math teacher gives the class the option for doing homework in class, with the teacher's help, or they can do it as homework and spend the rest of the class time at the computer lab. Your kid has been struggling a bit with Math and could use a little one on one time with the teacher; he also has baseball practice that night. But, he loves going to the computer lab. What does he do – go to the computer lab and save his homework for later or stay in class and finish it with the teacher's help?

Obviously, the most practical choice is to stay and finish his homework in class. He has a better chance of learning the material and getting a good grade (with his teacher's help) and he has freed up his evening so after practice, he doesn't have to rush home and do homework. Would your son go to the computer lab or stay in class and do his homework?

A problem solver?

Does your kid ever get overwhelmed? When your kid is in a dilemma, and doesn't know what to do, how does she react?

EXAMPLE

Your daughter is invited to two parties on the same day. What does she do? Does she avoid the dilemma completely and leave it up to you to decide for her? Does she wrestle with trying to decide which one to go to or does she try to figure out if there's a way to go to both? If she can't go to both, how does she decide which one to attend? What does she tell the girl whose party she can't go to? Does she give her a gift?

A good collaborator? Flexible? Adaptable?

Is he or she willing to work together with others – siblings or friends – to accomplish something? Does he or she offer ideas to others? If so, how does your kid react if someone else's idea is accepted instead of his or hers? Does he or she go along with it and help to make it work, make efforts to "sabotage" it, or quit?

EXAMPLE

Let's say you have two boys who have chores every Saturday. On one particular Saturday, they are both invited to a pool party at the neighbor's house, but they can't go until their chores are done. Do they "join forces" and figure out a way to work together to get both of their chores done quicker so they can go to the party sooner? Do they start out that way and then, almost immediately, start arguing over who will do what and how? Do they get their chores done quicker? Are they well done? Do they waste so much time arguing that the chores don't get done by the time the party starts? Do they get to the party early, very late or not at all as the result of their behavior?

A good communicator?

Is your kid clear when trying to explain something to you? Does she use details when telling a story ("a shiny, bright red corvette") or more general language ("a car")? Does she ask for more explanation to gain a better understanding of what's being said? Does she volunteer new or useful information or is it up to you to extract it, i.e., "pull teeth", in order to get it?

EXAMPLE

On Wednesday, your daughter asks, "Mom, could you take me, Molly, Lynnette and Danielle to the campgrounds this Saturday? "

You agree, even though it means you have to cancel your appointment with your hair stylist. That Saturday morning, as you and your daughter are packing the car with her stuff, a car pulls in the driveway with a mom and three other girls in it. Confused, you walk to the car and meet Mrs. Lewis, Danielle's mom, who is there to get your daughter and take the girls camping. "I switched days with another person so I have today off after all," Mrs. Lewis says.

Confused, you look at your daughter who is already in the car and ask her what is going on. Your daughter replies, "Danielle asked me to ask you in case her mom had to work. Guess she doesn't. Bye mom!"

Wouldn't it have been nice if your daughter had added the part about if Mrs. Lewis had to work? Or, how about if she had told Mrs. Lewis that her mom could take them so Mrs. Lewis didn't have to take the day off? That's where good communication starts . . . the benefits get even better - for everyone in the household - as the skill level increases.

Creative?

Does your kid initiate creative activities or does he or she need you to suggest them? If there are three common ways to do something, does your kid come up with a fourth?

When you purchase or have purchased (if your kids are older) a washer or microwave, what happens with the box? Does it get cut up right away or does it end up in your garage or backyard and become a fort, house or castle?

EXAMPLE

A severe summer thunderstorm has traveled through your town and the power has gone out. You have no back-up generator and it's just you and your son at home. No television, no internet service, no juice in your cell phones. Does your kid go his room and sleep? Walk around the house bored out of his mind? Or wander into the home office and build cars and sculpt statues out of a bunch of paperclips and rubber bands?

In the "Creative" scenario, if your kid went to his room and slept through the power outage, you should try to offer some kind of activity that gets him out of his room doing something. One of the more plausible activities in this case is to go "shopping" for stuff your kid likes or wants. Gather newspaper advertisements or catalogs from your kid's favorite stores. Establish an imaginary budget, and then, go through the ads or catalogs and "buy" whatever you would want to have as long as you stay within the budget. Pay attention to the coupons, rebates or special offers. Being a "creative shopper" is a real advantage and this is how your kid can learn to become one.

Because of its infinite illustrations, creativity is the easiest trait to recognize in your kid. Kids begin displaying it as toddlers, when they introduce you to their first invisible friend or run around the house as Batman or Darth Vader. However, as they get older, their "creative side" may get a bit blurred by other attitudes and behaviors they start developing. If your daughter starts dressing very oddly, it's up to you to discern if she's being rebellious, a-social or creative. But, if your kid can amaze you with the way she occupies herself when there's seemingly "nothing to do", you have a good basis for determining that your kid has creative aptitude.

The situations and characteristics presented in this Section illustrate the foundations of the 21st century 4 C's skills. And those very questions are the basis for assessing these skills in your kids.

Since assessing kids' aptitudes in anything is the first step in affecting their development, a teacher is now expected to ask and answer each question about each student, and then proceed to develop these skills in each student.

But, think about it … if it becomes an effort for you over the next week or so to reserve the time and attention to deliberate over each of the above questions and scenarios, for each of your children, how could a teacher possibly assess each student in a classroom environment – thoroughly and accurately?

Furthermore, if assessing a kid's skill level is problematic, think about how difficult (impossible) it would be for a teacher to develop the skill in each student while also getting through each day's rigorous lesson plan.

It can't happen in the classroom – but it needs to happen somehow. And it really can be as easy as observing, listening to and talking with your kids.

So please, spend a little time learning more about each skill and assessing your kids' skill levels in each of them. And then, give the activities presented in this book a try.

What have you got to lose? You spend all sorts of time with your kids anyway – whether it's driving, eating meals or watching TV – so why not add a little observation and conversation to the mix? You just might unwittingly get to know them better, make them better learners and enable them to better deal with the ups, downs and challenges of everyday life.

Connecting the 4 C's

Hopefully, the brief introduction to the 4 C's provided so far triggered your awareness of how these skills apply to all aspects of life, not just during the K-12 years as well as how they overlap, intersect, and relate to one another. Teaching these skills is often a "teach one, teach two or three more" proposition, as this discussion is designed to show.

But, before we proceed, here's a quick review.

Critical thinking – problem solving; figuring things out

Collaboration – working with others to get something done

Communication – providing information or insight or soliciting more information or insight

Creativity – originating something new

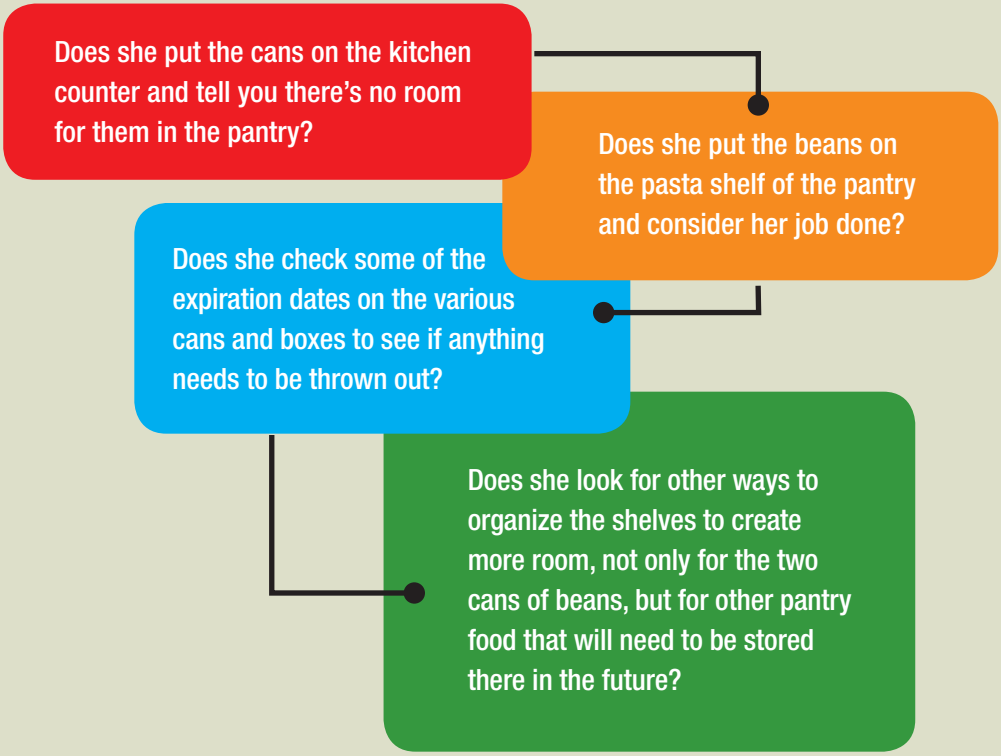
Now, using these summaries as your guide, notice throughout the scenarios below how one of the 4 C's often collaborates with a couple of the others.

Creativity - Critical Thinking - Collaboration at home

While creativity is displayed in many common ways, such as how a kid dresses, decorates his or her room or makes up an excuse for not doing something he or she was supposed to, it is also revealed more subtly in how a kid responds or reacts to everyday situations.

Let's say that you store all your non-perishable food in a pantry. And even though it's organized, it's been a bit neglected in the last month. Now, let's say that your daughter is helping you put away groceries.

When she goes to the pantry to put away two cans of beans, she discovers there is no room on the canned food shelf for them. **What does she do?**



Your daughter would have shown her **creativity** if she devised a new way to organize and shelve the pantry foods. But, in order to do that, she first had to use **critical thinking** skills to realize that the pantry shelves needed to be reorganized, and then determine how she could create more space and how best to use it. In addition, if she helped you put all the groceries away, she **collaborated** with you on this task.

By the way, do you notice that these skills produce practical, productive as well as artistic outcomes?

Critical thinking - Communication in the classroom

A Language Arts teacher explains that a dangling modifier is a modifier that is not connected to what it is modifying. The teacher goes on to explain that using dangling modifiers is an example of poor writing skills and that any paper turned in with dangling modifiers will be marked down.

The teacher has displayed **poor communication skills** because she has used the word "modifier" in her explanation of a dangling modifier. And, a fundamental "rule" of communication when defining the meaning of something is to NEVER use the term you are defining when giving a definition of it.

In case you're interested, here's an example:

Being over eight feet high, I couldn't get the bookshelf to fit in the living room.

"Being over eight feet high" is the modifier – it's further describing something; it's dangling because it's supposed to be describing the bookshelf, but in its current position in the sentence, it appears to be describing the person.

EXAMPLE

The teacher should have said something like "a dangling modifier is when a word or phrase that is describing or limiting something – a modifier – is placed in the wrong position in a sentence – dangling – which makes the entire sentence confusing. Then, the teacher should give an example sentence and point out the modifier and why it is dangling.

But, since the teacher didn't give the example and explanation provided on this page, the only kid in that classroom who has a decent shot at understanding dangling modifiers, and writing a paper without using one, is the kid who knows what a modifier is.

The kid who understands what modify means has a slight shot at grasping this

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concept and a slight shot at handing in a paper that doesn't have any dangling modifiers.

The kids who don't have a clue will be lost. But, if one of those kids who doesn't have a clue happens to be a **critical thinker**, he will recognize that the teacher's definition is "circular" and will ask the teacher what a modifier is so the entire class has an equal chance of understanding what is being taught.

Critical Thinking-Collaboration-Communication-Creativity at work

The Corporate office of a locally owned bank that has three branches in the city announces to each branch manager that a new contest will be launched and every branch must participate. The goal is to achieve the highest ratings from customers on a variety of customer service measures such as hours of operation, wait time at the drive-through, wait time inside the branch, and efficiency of resolving issues.

The campaign was to run for four weeks; completed customer surveys were to be submitted to the Corporate office weekly. The "prize" for the branch that had the highest cumulative ratings was that the "winning" branch manager received an all expense paid trip to the national Corporate meeting in Maui, where he or she will be recognized.

Branch A's manager is confident they will win. First, his branch is in the center of town and gets the most customers. He sees how friendly and helpful each of his employees are to every customer and how cheerful customers are when they enter and leave the bank. He hands the master copy of the survey to his Assistant manager, asks her to stack copies at every teller station and to make sure each teller hands them out to every customer who comes in the bank or goes through the drive-through.

Branch A's employees are also confident they will win and they see the contest as just one more thing to do when waiting on a customer. Without

being told, they know they are expected to hand each customer a survey once the transaction is completed.

Branch B's manager would like to go to Maui and feels her branch has a chance to win. But, since they have less walk-in customers than the other branches, she realizes they have to make sure the drive-through customers are given a survey and told to not leave it in the tube after they get their money or deposit receipts.

Branch B's employees also think they have a chance to win. The manager is very competitive which has resulted in their branch winning a couple other contests in the past few years. The employees agree with their manager that they'll need to make sure drive-through customers get a copy of the survey.

Branch C's manager is getting ready to retire. He's been in other contests and his branch has never won; a few close seconds, but never first place. He hands the survey to the new branch manager, who is still in training and tells her to make copies and circulate them to the tellers and assistant manager. Upon reading the survey, the new branch manager is very excited about the contest. She knows they have a disadvantage because they are on the edge of town and have the least amount of daily customers, but she really wants to see how well they are doing in customer service and wonders if there is a way they could win.

Branch C's employees know the routine of contests and have no expectation or desire to win. They place surveys at each of their stations and know what to do. However, the morning after the contest is announced, Branch C's manager-in-training calls a meeting of all employees, including the current manager. During the meeting, she asks each person about the other contests. What were they for? How well did this branch do? Why do you think we didn't win? What could we have done to win?

As each person offers input, she jots down notes; then she asks each person what he or she thinks the branch could do to win this contest. Immediately, one teller responds by asking, "Why do you want to win so bad, you wouldn't be the one who gets to go to Maui?"

She replies, "It's not about going to Maui. It's about finding out how good we are, and winning. If we win, it's an accomplishment that you can put on your resume and bring up at your next Employee Evaluation. It just might help you get a raise, more hours, or a promotion."

The teller says, "Sure, that'd be nice. But we lose contests because we don't have enough customers."

"Are you sure it's the number of customers, or is it the number of completed surveys with high ratings?" The manager-in-training replies.

To make a long scenario short, Branch C wins – not because they had a flurry of new customers, but because the manager-in-training had a parent who taught her 4 C's skills.

Critical thinking – She realized her branch had a perceived disadvantage because they didn't have as many customers as Branches A and B, but she also realized that the amount of customers had very little to do with the number of completed, high rating surveys her branch submitted to Corporate. Furthermore, she noticed that there was no stipulation as to how many times a customer could fill out a survey. So, to solve the problem of fewer customers, she recognized they had to make sure every survey handed out came back in and that customers were asked to complete another one every time he or she came to the branch.

Collaboration – By asking for information about previous contests, Branch C's manager-in-training opened up the floor for everyone to participate and contribute. Once each employee was motivated to win the contest, (by understanding that what was good for the branch was also good for them individually) they would naturally make an extra effort to provide friendly, courteous customer service to help make sure they collected more surveys with high ratings.

Communication – Closely related to collaboration, by calling a meeting to ask questions and listen to the feedback, Branch C manager-in-training illustrated how and why winning the contest could benefit each

individual employee, as well as the branch as a whole. In addition, she communicated the key reasons their branch could win - that circulating the surveys wasn't enough. In order to win, customers had to complete and return them, and they could submit as many as they were willing.

Creativity – Once it was established that making sure customers returned completed surveys was even more important than circulating them, Branch C's manager-in-training came up with a rather clever idea: Give the customers a "prize" for submitting a survey. Granted, the prize was just a sucker, something they could have anyway, but it was presented in a fun way, which made the customers feel good about submitting the survey, and gave it more importance.

The sucker turned out to be handy incentive to tellers and customers. Whenever a customer who was asked to complete a survey replied with "I already did!", tellers said, "And we appreciate it! But if you complete another one, you'll get another sucker." That simple idea and short bit of dialogue actually doubled their volume of high rating surveys, which sealed their win.

Note: Up until this point, there has been a deliberate effort to avoid describing creativity as "thinking outside the box", because frankly, it's an over-used cliché. Nonetheless, it is an efficient way to explain creativity.

A word about clichés

A cliché is a phrase that starts out clever and creative but for some reason, "goes viral". Once this happens, the once clever phrase is used by everyone everyday and it becomes anything but clever or creative. Clichés serve a conflicting purpose in the context of the 4 C's – once a cliché has hit cliché status, everybody knows exactly what it means, which accelerates communication and comprehension, but creativity (in verbal and written communications) declines.

Critical thinking – Collaboration - Communication - Creativity in life

You live in a sub-division that has only six houses; all are occupied by families with at least two kids. There have been a variety of issues and concerns you've talked about amongst yourselves over the past year, but nothing has been done about any of them. So you decide to form a neighborhood association composed of one representative per household.

Because you have the largest garage, the best bonfire pit and a finished basement, you agree to be the leader and have the meetings at your house. [You have read ***Help Teach Your Children*** and you and your wife have been working with your kids on their 4 C's skills for about six months, which you feel gives you an advantage as a leader of this rather eclectic group of people.]

At the first meeting, your goal is to create a list of each neighborhood related issue, complaint, problem or idea you and your neighbors have. You know that unless you have a working plan and schedule, you can't possibly improve anything.

Critical thinking/problem solving

You go around to each person and have them share their issues, etc. You realize you need everyone's input so each person is equally involved and is heard; you also know it's important for the group to be aware of all the issues, not just the ones that affect them.

Collaboration/communication

After everyone has voiced their concerns and issues they'd like to tackle, you suggest prioritizing them. It's agreed that this prioritized list will then become your association's agenda and that you'll take on the top three issues and try to have them resolved within six months.

Critical thinking/problem solving; Collaboration

There is much discussion and debate. It's looking impossible to agree upon the top three issues because too many of them have the same number of votes. There are only 6 people in the group. And of the 13 problems on the list, 8 of them have two votes each.

Mr. G. is getting frustrated and says he has to leave. Mrs. H. starts thinking the whole thing is "pointless" and gets up to leave saying "I don't care what you do." But, before she leaves, you have an idea.

You realize that, regardless of the inflexibility of some of the group members, simple math is really to blame for not being able to reach a consensus on the issues.

Critical thinking

So, you ask, "Who says we're the only ones who get to vote? How about if we make a ballot and give one to everybody in our neighborhood – including the kids who are at least 10? The ballot will list every problem we've put on this list – in alphabetical order to keep it fair – and each person can vote for two of them. Then we'll tally the votes and if the top three positions are still in ties, we'll make another ballot with just the issues that are tied for the top three spots and each person can only vote for one."

Creativity
"Thinking outside the box"
(forgive the cliché)

No one has any objection to that idea. It makes sense and gives the neighborhood association a second chance at being productive and successful. In addition, each person in the neighborhood, including the kids, are allowed to participate by sharing their opinions and co-owning the improvements that are made to the neighborhood.

Critical thinking; Collaboration; Communication

Part II

4 Seasons of 4 C's

Year round everyday 4 C's activities

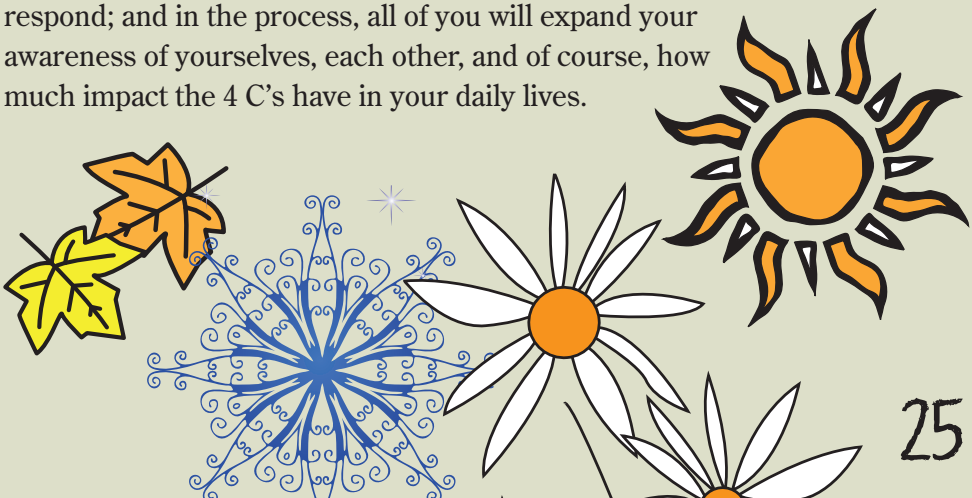
Are you ready to get started or are you still a little unsure? Either way is okay. This Section is here to help you help your kids when you believe you can make a difference. And it's not going anywhere.

Organized seasonally, this Section allows those who need more time to digest all this material the opportunity to do just that. Take your time. Read through Part I a few times; practice observing and drawing out your kids' skill levels.

Then, when you start to feel you actually could phase in this "4 C's skills home-based curriculum", start with the current season and follow along. This way, you'll never start by feeling you're already behind.

If you're ready to proceed, then please do so, and feel free to go out of order. If it's September but you think that the "brain training" activities would be an easier entry point for you and your kids, then by all means, start with Spring. If it's February, but you're intrigued by the critical thinking activities and want to give them a try, then start with Fall.

But, regardless of how or when you start, please start. And don't quit. Refresh yourself on each of the 4 C's periodically and then get in the habit of talking to, observing and questioning your kids. They will respond; and in the process, all of you will expand your awareness of yourselves, each other, and of course, how much impact the 4 C's have in your daily lives.



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Will your kids fall forward or backward in school this year?

You can make the difference!

As summer winds down, we are inundated with all sorts of "Back to School" sales and promotions. And while it is important to make sure your kids have the necessary supplies and of course, the coolest clothes and latest technology, you might want to consider making sure your kids are prepared to acquire super sharp 4 C's skills.

It's important to get your kids back in the learning mode before the first day of school and help prevent them from falling behind or staying behind throughout the year.

Note: People receive and process incoming information in different ways; some people need information presented visually, others need it presented audibly. Something that is perfectly clear to one person is not necessarily perfectly clear to another person at the onset. But, this distinction is more closely connected to communication skills and has little relation to each person's critical thinking skills, which kick in after the information has been received and processed, regardless of how.

And it's best to focus on the skill commonly considered "the first among equals" – Critical thinking. If you recall, critical thinking involves receiving, accumulating, and weeding through information or input, (i.e., gleaning through a pile of stuff) and then being able to determine what to absorb and what to reject in order to form an opinion or conclusion, take an action, affect an outcome, or discover a new piece of knowledge.

There are many "fun", practical, stimulating things you can do throughout the year at home to help develop or sharpen your kids' critical thinking skills, but first, you need to know their current ability to receive, process and classify information. Fortunately, there are a variety of everyday contexts for doing this (without your kids knowing they're being "assessed").

For Starters, Try This

Watch a television show or movie together. It could be a cartoon, a game show, a feature length film, an age appropriate reality show, or an infomercial (these last two actually work really well).

Note: If TV is taboo in your home, the same activity can be done with a book, article, or print or online advertisement.

At some point, after a scene (during a commercial break, or pause if watching a DVD or on demand), ask a question and actually try to get a conversation going.

Depending on what you're watching, ask something like: What just happened? What do you think is going to happen next? What would you do? Do you think that would work? Would you try that?

What just happened?

What do you think is going to happen next?

What would you do?

Do you think that would work?

Would you try that?

The idea is to see how closely your kid is following, understanding, absorbing, relating to or identifying with the story line, character(s), information or action.

Regardless of the response you get – a grunt, a one word answer, or a lengthy diatribe – follow it up by asking "Why?" or "Why not?"

Listen to your kids' answers. Were they thoughtful? Reasonable? Valid?

Or, did he or she simply say something that suggested it didn't make sense, it was confusing, or hard to follow?

Believe it or not, if your kid is being honest and not just trying to get out of the conversation, then admitting that the scene, monologue or story line "doesn't make sense" is a milestone in revealing critical thinking skills. Identifying a communication gap is a major accomplishment. Realizing when something is poorly communicated, illustrated or demonstrated is the foundation of critical thinking.

Note: It is equally significant to be able to recognize when or why something is *clearly* communicated, illustrated or demonstrated.

In other words, the basis of critical thinking is recognizing, processing and discerning information in such a way that it resonates – positively, negatively or not at all. And the activity provided in this discussion is the primer for assessing your kid's skill level in order to help develop it so it can be applied to every aspect of life – in and out of the classroom.

In the classroom

This is the skill that will enable your child to ask for more information or a more detailed explanation when he or she is "just not following" what the teacher is trying to teach. Once your child develops the self-confidence to recognize when something really isn't being explained clearly or accurately, (after consistent "practice" at home), it will become second nature to ask the teacher for more information or to question the teacher about what has just been said.

This can benefit other classmates as well. If your kid doesn't understand what's being taught, or when an explanation just doesn't make sense, chances are many other kids are also struggling with it. In the classroom, one ***productive*** voice is often the voice of many. Let your kid know that it's okay if that one productive voice is his or her voice.

Out of the classroom

Do you believe it's important for children to think for themselves? Do you feel that if parents instruct their children in the basics of right and wrong by illustrating why certain things are right or wrong, that they will be more apt to make the best decisions independently without being negatively influenced by others?

If so, then it shouldn't be much of a stretch for you to see how important critical thinking skills are. Critical thinking will allow a kid to disregard peer pressure and deflect the sting of bullying. Critical thinking skills will lead a person to many conclusions, the most simple of which is: "That doesn't make sense."

Honestly, if your child were being persuaded to shoplift, text while driving or ride her bike where she's not allowed to go, wouldn't it give you comfort if you knew he or she is capable of being able to process the "temptation" and conclude that doing one of those things "doesn't make sense" because of the consequences?

Summary

Give your kids every advantage at the beginning of the school year by helping them to become sharper thinkers. Get comfortable with asking your children "Why?" or "Why not?" types of questions. And encourage them to do the same with you. Asking open ended questions and allowing time for thoughtful answers are the basis for developing critical thinking skills which provide the foundation for each of the 4 C skills and aptitudes. And parents can do this best!

Will it stimulate wonderment or wanderlust?

Don't let your kid skate through the season!

As the fall segues into the holiday season, kids' interests start shifting to all things other than school. You may not be able to ever prevent that from happening. But you can help steer the direction in which their minds start wandering, while also instilling in them a bit of the wonderful, true spirit the holidays are meant to inspire; namely, consideration, kindness, and generosity. Sound too good to be true? It's not if you look at those three virtues as facets of collaboration.

Have you ever had to go along with the majority when you would have preferred not to? Of course you have…likely, countless times. Every time a candidate you didn't vote for got elected, or a Proposition you voted against got passed, you've had to go along with the majority. And even though it was against your preference, you likely remained in your voting district or complied with the new legislation. [If so, you lent **consideration** to your fellow constituents]

Now, how well do you fare in these situations?

Ever been involved in a joint buying decision with someone during which you had to give up one really great feature that you wanted in order to get two other features and stay within your budget? [This is often perceived by the other person as **kindness**.]
Or, did you chip in the extra money in order to get that great feature you wanted yet still stayed within the agreed upon budget? [This is being **generous.**]

Ever planned an event with a group of people and ended up doing "grunt work" in order to stay on schedule? [Others' perceptions of this behavior will range from **generous**, to **kind**, to **considerate**.]

When (or if) you did any of those things, did you do so because … holding out would have been to no avail … it would have been too much effort to argue in your own defense … or, because you realized it was the right thing to do, even though it wasn't the most preferable?

If you said yes to the last question, congratulations! You have shown aptitude in collaboration, which, if you recall, is assuming and sharing responsibility by compromising, remaining flexible, and working effectively with diverse people or dynamics in order to achieve a goal. **Or simply put, working with others to accomplish something.**

Believe It or Not

This is a skill and is perhaps the most powerful of all the 4 C's!

If you're unsure as to why collaboration, or cooperation, is so powerful, consider this. Collaboration requires rational thinking and reasonable behavior. Ever been in a social activity or work project that went sideways because a couple people in the group weren't being reasonable or willing to compromise? Of course you have.

And, this is one of the reasons that collaboration has been recognized as sorely lacking in contemporary American society. So much so that it has been spotlighted as one of the 21st century 4 C's learning and innovation skills all students must acquire in order to be considered college and career ready.

Conceptualizing Collaboration

So, now that you have a context for collaboration as a success skill, how do you help your kids acquire it? Well, first you have to give them a relatable frame of reference. In order for kids to become good collaborators, they

need to understand what collaboration means. So, how do you do this without lecturing or losing them? Not to worry – this part is easy.

Listen to Music

Kids of all ages listen to music, and every kid has a favorite song, musician, group, or genre. Fortunately for this exercise, every song, regardless of its "quality", is a great example of a collaborative effort between musicians, lyricists, composers, sound engineers and producers. While classical and jazz are the most profound illustrations of this, any song in any genre can be broken down into its parts in order to understand that it was the result of many people, with different talents, equipment, instruments, and skills, working together.

So, periodically, when you have some one-on-one downtime with each of your kids, put on some music; ideally, one of your kid's favorite songs or groups. Or, to get in this spirit, play some Holiday music. Listen silently, and then try to get a discussion going about the different instruments, vocals, beats, etc, that collectively reveal that a song is sum of its parts; it doesn't happen unless all the musicians, vocalists, instruments or sound boards and engineers are working with each other to create one song according to the music sheet.

Bake Together

What are the Holidays without all sorts of cookies, cakes, and pies?

This year, take advantage of the Holiday season (and in the process get some help with one of your Holiday "chores") and bake something with your kid; this will provide you with two ways to practice collaboration.

Begin by figuring out which tasks each of you will be assigned and explain each task in terms of how you will collaborate. As you gather the ingredients, talk about each one. Mention its purpose; for example, sugar makes the cookies sweet.

Ask questions to get your kid engaged in how each ingredient works with the others to form the great tasting cookie you're about to create.

EXAMPLE

Ask: What if you were this cup of sugar and you decided you didn't want to go in the bowl? What would happen to the batter? What would happen to the cookies? The idea is to point out how each person and element in a group (the two of you baking and each ingredient in the cookie recipe) contributes to (collaborates with) the shared outcome (fresh baked, delicious cookies).

Watch a movie or television show

Like music, every kid watches television or movies – either at home, in school or at the theatre – and most are enamored by the industry. Just as a song is the result of many people and elements making different contributions, so is a film work. So, watch a show together; the holidays make this really easy because at some point during the holiday season, just about every family manages to catch one of the classics – from *A Christmas Carol* to *Home Alone* to *Die Hard* (Yes, *Die Hard* has been unofficially deemed a Christmas movie).

As you're watching, point out and discuss the various elements involved in a film production – the set designers, animators and animation, the camera operators, scriptwriters, actors, directors(s), editors and producer(s), costume and make up people, etc. Once again, the purpose is to generate awareness of what is involved in a collaborative effort.

Read something or visit a website

Publishing, in all formats – print, online and digital – offers the same opportunity for this activity. Read a magazine or a book, ideally, one that your kid enjoys or is currently reading, or once again, one with a seasonal theme.

Break it out into all its parts – author(s), editors, photographers, graphic designers, printers, advertisers, etc. If your kid just isn't a reader, not a problem. The same can be done and said for a website, blog site or online publication (such as a catalog from your kid's favorite store – great for creating the gift wish list).

Remember, the purpose of each of the above is simply to create awareness of the process and result of collaboration. You don't need to transition this discussion into a lesson on collaboration. The point is simply to generate awareness of the concept of people working together to create something.

Also keep in mind, each of the above are simply suggestions for how to get your kids to grasp the concept in a way they can relate to so they understand that collaboration is the key to accomplishing anything. And the better the collaborative effort of everyone involved, the better the end result or product. Once you have done this, you can begin helping to develop collaborative skills in your kids.

Collaboration in Context

Below are a few suggestions that you can easily do at the dinner table or while driving that will actually cultivate your kids' collaborative aptitude. And, once they experience what it's like to accomplish something that they want to do, or receive something they'd like to have by giving up other things they discover are less important to them, they'll be more apt to see the value in being reasonable, open-minded and collaborative. **Warning: These activities will likely accelerate your collaboration skills as well.**

So, what kind of activities could possibly make your kid more cooperative, reasonable and willing to compromise?

Well, are you doing anything different this Holiday season?

Is a family member's birthday coming up?

Are you planning on taking a family trip in the future?

> While these collaboration activities can and should be done year round, Holiday season events and traditions offer ideal situations for trying them.

Even if your answer is no – real or imagined – each one of these events is an ideal situation for collaboration skills development.

Using an actual scenario or one you've made up, begin this activity by asking for ideas. Initially, all ideas are welcome. Make sure everyone contributes at least one idea; write them all down.

Then, together, narrow down the all the options and vote on one. The activity is not over until you have all agreed on one plan.

Examples

Throw a Birthday party

Let's say you propose that the family throw a birthday party for an aunt. First, break it down into parts and tasks (date, budget, theme, food, decorations, guest list, invitations, etc), then assignments (Who will be responsible for what?). Then, put each person and task on a schedule. If you really are going to have the party, reserve a few minutes each night or week to check the schedule and status of each person's assignment. Enjoy!

Take a trip

Trip planning should follow the same format. First, agree on a destination, then break it out into parts: itinerary (departure and

return dates, sights and landmarks to visit, daily planning); method and length of travel; equipment or supplies to buy and pack; pet and home care while you're away; budget and savings, etc.

Assign specific tasks to each person and put it on a schedule. Have a checkpoint meeting at least once a week to make sure everyone is doing their part or to work through any obstacles that may surface.

Resolve a domestic issue

Is your dog unruly and in need of a bit more training? Is your basement a cluttered war zone? Could your yard use some landscaping or clean up? Is it becoming more difficult for the family to agree on what to watch on television?

Every household has its issues; as does every household member. Initiate a brainstorming discussion of the things in and around the house that each person finds

Make up a story

If the above sounds like too much work, then start with something simple. Make up a story. As you are sitting around the dinner table or driving in your car, simply say, "Let's make up a story about…" (it can be anything). Then, say, "I'll start and then I'll hand off to you to make up the next part."

You can guide the story and your kid(s) with as many details upfront as you'd like.

EXAMPLE

Begin by saying that you're going to make up an adventure story about a prince in medieval England, or a super hero on another planet.

Give the basic plot (he saves the world) or moral (the importance of sharing).

Set a timeline for telling the story (15 minutes or three times around the group).

But, however you prefer to manage the activity, begin with a few opening sentences, then hand it off so that each person in the group adds to it until you have told a complete story with a beginning, middle, and end.

annoying, or would like to improve. Agree to tackle one or two of them, and then, as in the other two scenarios, break it out into tasks, assignments and a schedule.

Bonus: This one has added incentive – if you really execute, this activity will produce a permanent home or domestic improvement.

Summary

Collaborating is contributing, not caving, and like each of the 21st century 4 C's skills, collaboration is something that should be continuously practiced by kids and adults. This is the skill that makes the most difference when striving to accomplish a shared goal or realize the best possible outcome in any endeavor.

Once kids experience what it's like to accomplish something or get something they want by giving up other things that are less important to them, they'll start seeing the value in collaborating with others.

Are you ready to break for a little exercise?

"Use it or lose it" also applies to your brain!

Winter vacation has passed … Easter is right around the corner… the weather is getting warmer… thoughts begin drifting from reading and writing to baseball and swimming … and, it's the time of year to start exercising, but not only physically, also intellectually.

Brain drain, brain freeze and **brain-dead** are some of the common phrases everyone uses from time to time to explain why the neurons just aren't firing. The results of one of these "episodes" range from misfiling documents and misplacing keys to making wrong turns that put you at risk of being seriously late to wherever you were going.

But, did you know that exercising your brain can minimize or even prevent these occurrences?

Believe it or not, the brain – and "brain power" – can be and should be strengthened, developed and improved – just like your body. That's right! There are exercises for the brain that actually work. And the best part – you and your kids can do them together!

Regardless of age, "I.Q.", or reading level, you and your kids can become "smarter" by doing basic "brain exercises" that cost no money, require no additional time, and are actually fun!

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Here's a quick sample of a "brain game"

Try this yourself; then do it with your kids.

Say the word "silk" five times. Now, spell the word "silk".

What do cows drink?

Answer: Water.

(If you said "milk", you're not at your sharpest right now.)

Try another one.

Say the words: ghost, roast and boast. What do you put in a toaster?

Answer: Bread.

(If you said "toast", you probably are right now.)

You need to use all of your brain and so do your kids!

If you are looking for a new reason to restrict the amount of time your kids spend playing action video games, here's one: playing an action video game provides no brain stimulation.

However, reading and internet searches do. So, if you and your kids both like to search the internet, great! Do it together as often as possible.

Of course, it's best for your searches to be productive, so you could "plan" to search for books or articles on things that interest your kids (sports, for example). Or, initiate a discussion about something or someone famous, then conduct a search for more information on the issue or person.

The search process alone stimulates a large portion of the brain; in fact, research shows internet searches stimulate more brain activity than reading. But, when paired with reading and a discussion either before or after, internet search activities can be a very valuable and productive way to interact with your kids.

Sources: The Franklin Institute Online; Brain Gym

Right brain - Left brain – Which side are you on?

You're probably familiar with "right brain and left brain", which relates to the two sides of the part of your brain that is directly behind your forehead. Each side represents certain attributes and accounts for certain characteristics in both kids and adults.

Left Dominant

people are logical, orderly and inquisitive. They like to figure out how things work. They have an advantage during their K-12 educational years because traditional education teaches in a linear, rote fashion which appeals to how left dominants receive and process information.

Right Dominant

kids and adults are generally creative; they're your artists, musicians and "unconventional thinkers".

The good news is that both sides of the brain can be "exercised" which results in the full use of both sides. Imagine a logical artist or a creative mathematician … or a dancer who can read a list of facts, memorize them and ace the test … or the scientist who can describe an experiment in beautiful prose. But aside from these potential outcomes, developing and utilizing both sides of the brain gives a person a tremendous advantage – in school, the workplace and life.

Being able to receive and process information logically, as well as creatively, keeps a person "confusion proof", which has an impact on comprehension and retention. Furthermore, balancing the right and left brain provides the foundation for developing critical thinking skills – primary survival skills in the 21st century information age – especially for kids who are growing up immersed in it.

Getting to Both Sides

Basically, to exercise both sides of the brain, you must do two things – move your body and get the neurons on the left side of your brain to connect to the neurons on the right side of the brain (Pardon the over-simplification.)

Move your body

Moving the body is as simple as it sounds – just put yourself and your kids in motion. Sedentary kids are at risk of more than obesity, they're at risk of becoming right brain dominant which, as suggested above, is a learning disadvantage during their K-12 years. So please understand that physical activity benefits more than just the body – it works the brain also. You don't have to move fast or far, in fact, moving slowly and deliberately, even in place, can enhance the benefits of movement.

Connect your neurons

This is simpler than you probably think. You only have to cross one side or part of your body over to the other side. For example, put a glass of water on your left side, but reach for it with your right hand. As your right arm crosses over the left side of your body, the right and left neurons are connecting with one another and you are utilizing your full brain. A couple other ways you and your kids can effortlessly connect your "right and left neurons" are by putting anything you may use (a tool, utensil, etc) on the opposite side of the hand that you'll use it with, or brushing your teeth or eating with your opposite hand.

All together now

Children model the behavior of their parents. For example, when the child sees that the parent is a reader, the child begins to accept reading as a natural activity and will be more apt to become a reader.

"Brain games" will work the same way, but unlike reading, which is primarily an individual activity, "brain exercises" can be done together.

To the right is a very short list of "crossing the midline" physical activities that you and your kids can do throughout the year, not just in the spring. The possibilities are vast; hopefully, this list will trigger a few other activities that you (and/or your kids) currently do, could do, or should do that offer the same benefit. (Notice that some of these things are actually productive in other ways, also.)

Physical Activities

Walking while swinging your arms

Ironing

Raking leaves

Shoveling snow and dumping the shovel-loads in piles on each side of the area you're shoveling

Swinging a golf club or a baseball bat

Playing ping-pong

Summary

Intellectual aptitude, "i.e. "smarts", is not necessarily pre-determined; it can be developed the same way muscles can be developed, by anyone, beginning at any time in life.

Since developing "brain power" is not a priority of K-12 education or mainstream public service announcements, it's up to parents to take advantage of the advantages they can offer their kids.

The overriding message here is that intelligence (in the form of balancing out right-left brain dominance) is not "fixed" upon birth; it is possible and important that you and your kids continuously harness your intellectual growth potential. As a parent, you can instill and develop this notion in your kids once you have done so for yourself. And you can start very easily – by crossing your midline a little bit every day.

You know the phrase "Use it or lose it!" Well, it also applies to your brain. Believe it or not, with regular practice, brain training can make you and your kids a whole lot smarter and spring is a great time to start.

Summer

Will it be a setback or a springboard for your kids?

The difference is four or five books!

Summer means a variety of things to people - but to kids it means one thing: No school! Sadly, it seems parents embrace that notion also. The result is that, for the most part, when the school doors are shut, so are kids' minds – and they tend to suffer learning losses.

Termed "Summer Setback", summer learning losses and the resulting achievement gaps that surface the following fall, can be prevented. Extensive research has shown that regardless of a kid's race, socioeconomic status, or previous achievement, reading 4 or 5 books over the summer will minimize or prevent both.

Just 4 or 5 books can make a huge difference!

Educators readily acknowledge the importance of kids reading over the summer. Some school districts and communities have created summer reading programs whereby, on a walk-in basis, kids come into the school and choose a book to read. Teachers remain available to help the kids select books and engage them in a discussion of the book after they finish reading it. Parents are welcome to join their kids or participate to any degree they desire. Results are always favorable.

But since these school districts and community programs are few and far between, and like most, are limited by all sorts of resources – human and financial – as a parent, please consider creating a summer reading program in your home.

It's really simple and has tremendous benefits, including a boost in communication, critical thinking and creative skills.

You do not have to be an educator, reading specialist or librarian to generate the same or better results as a school or library sponsored program.

The results are derived solely through reading and talking about a book that is age or reading level appropriate.

Each book can either be chosen by you or your child or the two of you can choose the books together.

Here's all you need to do:

Step 1 Ideally, launch your program by having all 4 or 5 books purchased, checked out at the library or at least selected. To do this, go to a bookstore or library together and select all 4 or 5 books in one trip or make a few trips every couple weeks. You can also go online; there are plenty of online bookstores and there are also many age and grade specific educational and reading sites that offer excellent reading content – in print and digitally – for kids to browse and choose from.

Step 2 Put each book on a reading schedule. Write the title of the book on the family schedule or calendar to highlight the day to begin reading it and write in the "target" day when you will talk about the book. Commit and hold to these days.

Depending on your kid's age and the length of each book, allow one to two weeks per book – from reading it to discussing it. At this rate, if your start date is July 1 and you have five books selected, the fifth book would be read and discussed by Labor Day, right at the beginning of the school year.

Note: You can start and maintain an in-home reading program at any time of year. The results will always be favorable.

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Step 3

Formulate some basic questions that you will ask about each book. While it's ideal, it is not necessary to read the books your child reads. A productive Q & A discussion with your child about a book he or she has read should give you a clear understanding of the story, the characters, the setting, the plot, etc.

Don't conclude the conversation until you have most of this information. If your kid's answers aren't complete or clear, look through the book together to find the "clues" or information in order to discuss the answers in greater detail.

Remember, the milestone is 4 or 5 books. If your child is an avid reader, and is likely to read four or five books over the summer anyway, take him or her a step further and engage in deeper discussions of the books he or she has read. The purpose is to stimulate deeper comprehension, communication, and critical thinking skills.

Sample Discussion Questions

Which character was your favorite? Why?

Would you like to live where and when this story takes place?

What was your favorite part of this story? Why?

Which part did you like the least? Why?

Did it end like you thought it would? Did you like the ending? If you could change it, what would you make different?

Extra Credit - A Journal

It is also highly recommended to have your kids keep some kind of journal over the summer. This should not be confused with a personal diary. For "Summer Springboard" purposes, the journal should have daily or weekly entries; it could be a reading log for writing about what he or she has read.

A reading log entry would include things like the title, author, genre, characters, good parts, boring parts, etc. Or each entry can be a comment about things like a vacation trip, an event he or she attended, (such as a baseball game or concert), things that occurred (a bad storm), things to do or things that were done, thoughts, opinions, movies – basically anything the kid wants to write about. The point is to get your kid to spend a few quiet minutes each day or week thinking and writing.

The journal can be any style or size. While blank cover-bound pages can be purchased just about anywhere, it can be as simple as a spiral notebook, a tablet, or sheets of paper clipped together. And of course, depending on access and ability, a journal can be created and maintained on the computer.

Summary

While regular reading is associated with higher academic achievement, it is not the be-all-end-all to guaranteeing higher reading scores and grades. Reading and writing skills increase with practice and when parents actively promote these "hobbies" through direct involvement, the benefits will extend far beyond converting "Summer Setback" into "Summer Springboard".

The point is to get your kid to spend a few quiet minutes each day or week during the summer reading, thinking and writing.

Help Teach Your Children

We would like to hear from you

Help teach your children…just hearing those words can be a bit overwhelming, right?

While that's understandable, before you roll your eyes and say, "Oh yeah, sure, like I have time for this …" please notice that the first two words of this outreach and initiative are *Help Teach*. Help Teach Your Children is presented in a way to help you understand exactly what, why and how you really can help teach your children… painlessly, without having to spend any extra time or money.

But that shouldn't be where it ends. Help Teach Your Children is built on the concept of community. That's where you, the parent, come in.

The paths to a higher understanding of the 4 C's are as varied as the parents who take the steps to implement them. For every successful example of critical thinking documented, there are a thousand brilliant ideas waiting to be heard.

So please, share with us your ideas, your questions, your success stories.

That way, while we help teach our children, we don't forget to support our parents.

Share your success stories with us at www.GreenwoodEditions.com

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