

Frontline

My VIEW by Julie Lythcott-Haims

When I was Stanford University's freshman dean, too many of my students lacked a sense of agency in their own lives and that concerned me. I began speaking out against the overparenting I was seeing on my campus – parents attending information sessions designed for students, parents reviewing papers before a student turned them in, parents arguing with professors over grades. That kind of thing.

One day I was having dinner with my own kids when I leaned over and began cutting my 10-year-old son's meat. That was my a-ha moment – that we'll find it nigh on impossible to let an 18-year-old have agency in his or her own life if we've been doing too much for them throughout childhood. That's when I realized the lack of agency wasn't a college problem, it was a problem rooted in childhood.

We parents love our kids fiercely, and we're afraid they won't be successful in life unless we handle the stuff of life for them –so we manage their deadlines, bring forgotten belongings to them, speak with authority figures on their behalf, and keep track of and often outright do their schoolwork. They grow chronologically to adulthood, but they lack the skills to enable them to fend without us, and somewhere deep inside of them they feel incompetent no matter how successful we've been at perfecting things for them

Reasonable Expectations

I drew up this list of eight things with an eye toward what I felt was lacking in college students and with a memory of what we used to take for granted an 18-year-Old could do.

K-12 educators can reflect upon how to help students learn these skills. Policies forbidding parents from bringing forgotten homework, sports equipment, clothing and lunches are a great place to start.

- **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO TALK TO STRANGERS.** In the real world, that means faculty, deans, advisers, landlords, store clerks, human resource managers, coworkers, bank tellers, health care providers, bus drivers and mechanics.
The crutch: We teach kids not to talk to strangers instead of teaching the more-nuanced skill of how to discern the few bad strangers from the mostly good ones. Thus, kids end up not knowing how to approach strangers – respectfully and with eye contact – for the help, guidance and direction they will need out in the world.
- **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO FIND HIS WAY AROUND.** That includes a campus, the town in which her or his summer internship is located or the city where the student is working or studying abroad.
The crutch: We drive or accompany our children everywhere, even when a bus, their bicycle or their own feet could get them there. Thus, kids don't know the route for getting from here to there, how to cope with transportation options and snafus, when and how to fill the car with gas or how to make and execute transportation plans.
- **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO MANAGE ASSIGNMENTS, WORKLOADS AND DEADLINES.**
The crutch: We remind kids when their homework is due and when to do it – sometimes helping them to do it, sometimes doing it for them. As such, kids don't know how to prioritize tasks, manage workload or meet deadlines without regular reminders.
- **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE RUNNING OF A HOUSEHOLD.**
The crutch: We don't ask them to help much around the house because the checklisted childhood leaves little time in the day for anything aside from academic and extracurricular work. Thus, kids don't know how to look after their own needs, respect the needs of others or do their fair share for the good of the whole.

➤ **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO HANDLE INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS.**

The crutch: We step in to solve misunderstandings and soothe hurt feelings for them so that kids don't know how to cope with and resolve conflicts without our intervention.

➤ **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO COPE WITH UPS AND DOWNS.** This relates to courses and workloads, college-level work, competition, tough teachers, bosses and others.

The crutch: We step in when things get hard, finish the task, extend the deadline and talk to the adults. Thus, kids don't know that, in the normal course of life, things won't always go their way and yet they'll be okay regardless.

➤ **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO EARN AND MANAGE MONEY.**

The crutch: They don't hold part-time jobs. They receive money from us for whatever they want or need. Thus, kids don't develop a sense of responsibility for completing job tasks, accountability to boss who doesn't inherently love them, or an appreciation for the cost of things and how to manage money.

➤ **AN 18-YEAR-OLD MUST BE ABLE TO TAKE RISKS.**

The crutch: We've laid out their entire path for them and have avoided all pitfalls or prevented all stumbles for them. As such, kids don't develop the wise understanding that success comes only after trying and failing and trying again (grit) or the thick skin (resilience) that comes from coping when things have gone wrong.

Remember, our kids must be able to do all of these things without calling a parent on the phone. If they're calling us to ask how, they do not carry that life skill.

JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAMS is the author of *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2016), from which this column is drawn with the author's permission.