

How Your Child Can Win in Life

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The Doon School's headmaster
on raising kids who love to learn

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 juggernaut

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For Hugh, Will and Eve
Our glorious experiments and companions

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Introduction

Every parent wants the very best for their child, which often means being happy and successful. It might also mean going to a good school, getting into a good college and finding the right internship before embarking on their chosen career.

How do you help your child achieve these goals?

Over the last twenty years, I have had the good fortune to work with thousands of exceptional students and their parents in seven outstanding schools around the world.

Alongside the schools for which I have worked, I have visited dozens of others and had the chance to learn from their students and teachers about what they are doing, how they are doing it and why it works, or doesn't work, for them.

While there are many differences between these schools, there are a few striking similarities from which

I think we can learn as we go about the serious and essential business of teaching, mentoring and parenting. In this book, I will try to distil those learnings for you.

Here's the most important lesson of all – even as you worry about sending your child to the best school and giving them every opportunity, remember that **you will shape your child more than any school can.**

Children's brains are extraordinarily plastic; neuroplasticity is what we call its ability to change. They are constantly watching and absorbing and learning – and they are naturally most influenced by the world they see around them every day. This isn't school. It's home; at least for the first few years. Whether you like it or not, you are the teacher who will have the greatest impact on them.

I was talking to four mothers of teenagers and twenty-somethings recently about their children's education, what had worked well and what not. Their children had studied at some of the top day schools in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru as well as respected boarding schools such as The Doon School, Woodstock and Welham Girls' School.

They all made the same point – if you, as a parent, are able to set a good example then the work that the school has to do becomes a great deal easier. The evidence does support this view; **it is home rather than school that has the greatest effect on student learning and success.**

Schools can add value, but the value system, work ethic and curiosity needed to succeed in school comes from parenting.¹

Your role modelling and behaviour thus have to be consistent and explicit, something that is discussed with and reflected on by children. This is especially so when it comes to children seeing how their parents treat others and what their actions show they value.

As the managers, curators and secretaries of our children's experience of the world for the first eighteen years of their lives, we set the foundation for what follows. We all know this, but it is not always something that we are very deliberate about.

We get distracted from active parenting by all the other things that require our attention and sometimes the immediacy of our children's needs becomes secondary. Let's be honest, it's hard to be consistent. Which is why children find it difficult to read and learn from the messages they receive from parents that seem to change from one day or one situation to the next.

So what can you do as parents to set your child on the right path? This is where my book hopefully comes in. This is not a self-help book (there are enough of those) or a manifesto for changing the current state of the education system (though this is more than needed). This is also not a piece of peer-reviewed research that will stand up to academic scrutiny – rather it is a

collection of observations and experience gained *at the chalkface*, by living and working in some of the world's top schools over the last twenty years.

My view is simple. Children don't need to learn ten languages and musical instruments, do a host of extra curricular activities and summer schools or stay in their rooms studying all night to do well at school, get into good universities and become successful. Rather, as parents, we need to create children who love to learn, and the way to do this is to raise kids who are calm, curious and conscientious.

And how do we do this? Well, we need to have the time to play with them, be outdoors with them and, most importantly of all, read to them and engage them in discussion about what they are seeing, hearing, feeling and thinking.

When we meet students during our admissions interviews for The Doon School we ask them *not* to bring their portfolios which showcase their extracurricular activities, the various courses they have taken, etc. We are not trying to devalue the work that they have put in or the opportunities their parents have given them, but we want to see the effect that these activities have had on them, not simply a well-organized file of certificates. If the only outcome has been the acquisition of pieces of paper, then what was the point?

Time after time we are meeting children who have

been given lots but learned little, able to talk about things that they have, but unable to talk about what they have learned as a result. When children are reduced to names on a shopping list rather than people in whom we have invested our time, they become part of that *normal* against which they will be compared. As parents it is our responsibility to make them special, not just to think that they are.

I want to explore a few qualities and skills that every child needs to develop that will become the foundation of success in school and what we, as parents, can do to help.

The first three skills I will look at are reading, speaking and writing. While at first glance these may seem incredibly obvious, I believe that these building blocks are part of the foundation that parents need to get right and pay more attention to.

To be curious, well informed and articulate, to be able to think clearly and express themselves – these are the foundations of your child’s future success no matter what they become, be it an engineer or a musician, a writer or doctor. Once children learn these, there are no limits to what they can aspire to.

But isn’t this the school’s job? In school, our children occupy one of perhaps twenty, thirty or forty seats, which means that very often their needs, development and learning will be aggregated and that they will be

measured against what is considered *normal*. Children are more likely to do well if the learning of these key skills continues at home.

Alongside these skills we must also help our children develop some key personality traits – conscientiousness and empathy that curb their opposites of apathy and entitlement. I believe that the attitude with which children approach their learning and work has a critical effect on how they perform in the future and they will learn that attitude from us.

I will also explore some of the ways in which play is so important in developing these traits in children and how we, as their role-models-in-chief, need to be mindful of the messaging we give when it comes to learning and working with others. There are also some things to be said about how our schools shape the lives and experiences of our children because of the way things are done here in India.

Later in the book I'll give you an insider's view on how to choose a good school and how to get the most out of it and the people working with your child. In part three you will find a more playful index of some of the subjects and themes of this book, which I hope will be a useful and entertaining summary.

Creating the environment in which your child, or someone else's child, can grow into the person you hope they will become is what education, in the broadest

sense, is all about. Principals need to be environmental engineers in their schools, teachers need to be doing it in their classrooms and parents should be seeing to it at home. We are all working together and, as with any team, we need to know how to support each other.

1

Reading

Turning your child into a thinker

The Purkal Youth Development Society is a school of 550 students, almost entirely from the most disadvantaged sections of society in Uttarakhand. However, if you spend thirty minutes talking to the students of the eleventh and twelfth classes you can't help but wonder how the school has turned the damaged, frightened children who join the school into articulate and confident young men and women.

Their graduates could go and fit in anywhere in the world and they get into some highly competitive schools like the United World Colleges and, in turn, the universities in the United States that the Davies Scholarship programme will take them to.

One of the main causes is, I think, that they have two libraries in the school staffed by people who know the books well and are excited by them. The primary school library is probably the most attractive library I have seen outside of the American or British Schools of the metros and there are people in and out of the school almost daily who are reading to, talking to and listening to the children. This is what is propelling the children at Purkal to heights that many far more expensive schools are aiming for.

I have visited some fancy schools in this country where they have to unlock the library to let me in and have a look around (**warning sign: if they are locking the books up, say thank you and look for another school**).

When a city or a country builds libraries everything improves; literacy increases, time spent in school increases, domestic violence decreases, re-offending rates drop and well-being grows. If a city has more prisons than libraries you know that there is something wrong; just hope that the prisons have libraries inside otherwise they are less likely to be effective at reforming and rehabilitating.

If you want your child to get ahead in life, to develop their own ideas and benefit from the collective knowledge of centuries then there is one unbreakable rule: you must help them to become readers; not simply

people who can read, but people for whom reading is as much a part of their lives as breathing; the quality of their lives depends on it.

Developing a habit of reading is not only going to open up for them whole new worlds of enquiry, joy, interest, love, culture and empathy, but also create thinkers who will be able to draw on more experience than their relatively short, bounded lives will give them.

No matter how intelligent a child might be (and you can blame some of that on genetics) they will never get to the point of coding the next machine, learning Artificial Intelligence (AI) or designing a new state-wide system for collecting recyclables from first principles; we all have to stand on the shoulders of the giants who have got us to where we are today and they have usually written things down.

The very act of reading is also something that our children need to engage in so as to develop competencies and attributes that will help them in school, work and life; the practice of sitting still and travelling somewhere in your head, the act of turning the written word into something that can consume you or persuade others and grow an idea into a movement.

Reading as a silent, personal activity is one path that our children must be able to follow, as is reading aloud, the path on which they can be joined by or include others.

Like all of our children's habits and learned behaviours, they take their lead from us, their parents. If they are to find a love of reading they will need you to share your love of it with them.

If you don't have a love of reading then recognize that it is one of the most valuable things you can give your child, and all it requires is the desire and the effort to start something that is good for both of you as a part of your daily routine.

Think of it as mental nourishment and hygiene in the same way you think of them eating their meals, taking a bath and brushing their teeth.

As soon as your child is able to sit up in your lap and focus on something that you hold in front of them you should be reading to them. When children are very young I really don't think it matters what you read to them, so long as you are there with them, making contact physically, with the spoken word and, as they get older, with the ideas you are sharing.

When I talk about reading I am not talking about reading in English. Reading in our mother tongue and acquiring that language is going to have the same developmental effect on your child. It will also allow you to choose the books you remember from childhood and allow grandparents to be involved in reading too. There is no point in reading to your child in a language you cannot comfortably read. Once they have gained

fluency in a language, and in some homes this will be two languages, you can introduce another.

To begin with you can read the lovely board-books that you can find on Amazon's 'up to two years' pages or you could well read yesterday's financial report from the newspaper. If you do it with love and enthusiasm it will be equally stimulating.

Do make sure it is print you are reading though, and not text from a screen. It is an entirely different kind of stimulation that is likely to lead to something that you don't intend or want for your child.

When you start reading to your baby it will be the sound of your voice and your presence that makes the experience so nice for them, then it will be the pictures and the feel of the books that you are looking at together while you read.

Eventually they will be able to decode some of the symbols that you are looking at and reading to them, and soon enough they will be able to catch you out if you read the wrong words; now they are starting to learn and remember the words, the first part of learning to read.

It will be some years before they sit down with a book themselves and read it, so you are still their guide. Even when they do enjoy reading themselves they will love being read to even more because by then *having* time with you will have become scarce, and it is back to the

reassurance of the sound of your voice and you being next to them that they need.

Of course, this is never going to happen if you yourself don't read or are not seen reading by your child. This is called *modelling* and **children are remarkable at learning through modelling. They will learn your best and your worst behaviours, which you should try to recognize as feedback rather than something to get cross about.**

Sometimes parents get out of the habit of reading. I know that I read far more in the school holidays than I do during the term because other things get in the way.

Reading is like exercise and I know from experience that other things get in the way of that too when I let them. I also know that I feel great when I am able to exercise regularly and what I have to do is make time for it; it is the same for reading.

If our children see us sitting quietly, reading, then we will help them develop their capacity to sit quietly and learn to be happy, be alone with themselves, be at peace without being bored or needing to be entertained, played with or attached to a device. **Developing a habit of reading also develops a habit of contentment.**

Make the time, have books in the places that you sit to relax, have them in the bathroom, keep a fresh pile of books on the coffee table, not *coffee table books*, actual books. Homes that are devoid of books are too often

devoid of the other things that books bring, and if you want to buy something for your child that will add value to them as people you should be reaching for a book.

When you read something that resonates, makes an important point or you think makes a good teachable moment for your child then take the trouble to share it and read it to them. Sharing here still means reading to them. Giving them something to read might work but asking them to ‘listen to this . . .’ is going to continue to help them in learning *how to read*. You can do this no matter how old they are.

Parents should read to their children all the way through primary and into secondary school. Many parents stop reading to their children as soon as they are able to make the transition from reading out loud to reading to themselves. It’s too soon. You cannot be sure of what they are silently reading to themselves and they still have a great deal to learn from you.

I certainly think that we should be reading out loud to our children into their young teens. It doesn’t need to be from the stories and novels that you read to them at bedtime in the past, now there is the world of classic fiction, op-ed pieces in the press and those LinkedIn, Aeon and HBS articles that have a key idea from which they can learn.

From the regular experience I have of listening to boys reading out loud when I step into classrooms or conduct

interviews (with adults sometimes, never mind children), I wonder whether they have ever been read to at all.

Children who are read to, and who read, are fluent when they read out loud. Children who are avid readers, but are not used to hearing the written language, tend to sound tongue-tied when they start reading aloud.

If a child can read aloud well it's an indication that their comprehension is well developed. This is one of the things we look for in the group interviews that we run as part of our admissions process at The Doon School.

It is also why debating and presentation as a means of assessment are so good because they allow us, and other students, to hear and witness each other's thoughts. Sadly for many children, assessment is all too often nothing more than tests and examinations in our current school system, which puts them at a disadvantage. As a measure of their understanding, speaking is just as good as writing and reading out loud to your child will improve both their understanding and their capacity to communicate it.

Don't worry about being a non-native English speaker or having an accent. Good reading is about using punctuation, emphasis, rhythm and delivery to aid understanding and enjoyment. This is why reading in your mother tongue is so valuable.

The students at the Purkal Youth Development Society, for example, are wonderful readers although

they don't come from families who speak English. Just as actors turn a (screen) play into something that we love, reading out loud turns writing into something that pours over us, excites us and becomes something that we participate in.

As your kids get older you should share with them what you read in the newspapers, magazines and journals. This will enable them to develop an interconnected world view, a global-mindedness in which they can place themselves not at the centre but as part of something that depends on many others. The world is complicated and helping them understand that complexity, even if we do not understand the history, context and situation entirely ourselves, is helpful. Many good investigative news outlets, like the *Guardian* in the UK and the *Washington Post* in the US, have developed mini sites that give the background on international news stories so that beginners understand how we got to this point. It can be extremely daunting for some students to start trying to understand what's happening around them. A page called 'All you wanted to know about the Arab-Israeli conflict (or insert any other geopolitical topic)' can be very helpful for such students, especially those who are too afraid to ask.

My father still calls me or sends me a message about things he is reading. And it works both ways. **When your children start sharing what they are reading with you,**

then you know that you have done your job and helped them become readers and thinkers.

If you feel that your own reading is not as fluent as you would like your child's to be, or that you are unable to do what it takes to make Ruskin Bond or Harry Potter come alive by acting out the characters' voices (my theatrical wife was always so much better at this than me) then there are many good recordings of actors and authors reading their works.

Listen to Robert Munsch reading *The Paper Bag Princess* on YouTube, Vimeo and Spotify from the Children's Audio Books playlist, to hear how it's done. This is wonderful storytelling training for parents and it allows children to hear just how things ought to sound. Reading along with the book becomes another experience altogether.

Applications like YouTube and Spotify allow you to choose just what you want, but there are many good spoken word radio shows and podcasts that also give the opportunity to hear language being spoken and used well.¹

If you have friends or relatives who are not readers and you worry that their children might be disadvantaged or if you are involved in the education of children whose parents are not readers, then there are things that you can do to help. There are online and mail order book clubs for readers of all ages available in India.

Every city will have its book clubs, readers' and writers' clubs, literary festivals and book fairs. If you have access to a smartphone you can find an activity every month that you can do with your child based on books.

Publishers like Scholastic, that work around the world in both primary and secondary education sectors, establish book clubs with various schools, set up book fairs and have parent sections on their websites through which they share their age-appropriate reading material.

There are also libraries, school-guided reading programmes, book lists and blogs to guide, advise and inform you about what's out there to read. While many Indian kids I meet start with Enid Blyton and the *Hardy Boys* (an indication of what their school libraries and parents have on the shelves) there is much better and more relevant children's literature available today.

If you are not a reader but have got to this point in the book then well done, keep going and keep talking to your child about what they enjoy reading and what book they think you might enjoy next (apparently I need to read *Norwegian Wood* by Murakami).

If they don't take to it right away then don't give up, all children go through phases and that's as true with reading as it is with friends, playthings and tastes. Be careful not to make reading a source of conflict, that would undo all the good work!