



# Children and Opportunity

KEYS TO SUCCESS

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My mother had really good instincts, and she knew how to “stretch” me slightly outside my comfort zone to try new things. She always let me choose what new things to try.

## Teach Your Child Life Skills

In my experience, many parents struggle with being “helicopter” parents; they are so overprotective that they do not allow their child to develop necessary life skills. Teaching your child life skills takes time and patience, but, in the long run, it is these skills that will help your child reach his/her greatest potential. Some of these skills include the following:

- **Money Management** - I had an allowance starting when I was eight years old. My mother would never buy certain things for me. If I wanted comic books or candy, I would have to save my allowance and buy these things myself. Start when your child is young, and teach your child the value of money.
- **Time Management** - It is important that your child be able to stay on a schedule and not lose track of time in a special interest or on a video game. Time should be allocated for personal care, household chores, schoolwork, physical activity, entertainment, and other things. Find the best way to help your child manage his/her time.
- **Hygiene** - Teach your child the importance of proper hygiene. This is non-negotiable. Teach your child to independently brush his/her teeth, shower regularly, wear deodorant, etc. This is vital for success in all aspects of life and for having good self-esteem.
- **Shopping Independently** - Have your child purchase a jug of milk or a bag of apples. Have him/her purchase a birthday card for a friend, or a pack of gum. Teach your child how to look for the best prices, quality and value of items.

In order for individuals to be prepared for meaningful employment and independent living, they must be taught these life skills. However, this learning will not happen overnight. I recommend giving your children developmentally appropriate chores starting when they are seven or eight years old. This can be clearing or setting the dinner table, making their bed every morning, or taking out the trash. In every house there are chores that can be done. Then, as soon as possible, help your child find a job outside the home. In my day, it was a paper route. Today it might be helping out at the farmer’s market, raking the neighbor’s yard, or walking dogs for other people. I recommend any job that is on a schedule and where someone other than mom or dad is the boss. When I was 13, mother had me working for a seamstress that did dressmaking out of her home. I took apart dresses and hemmed them. This is where I learned to manage my money and my time. Many of the critical life skills I learned hark back to having household chores, and from my teenage employment.

It is best for a child to get at least one real paid job before graduating from high school. It is best to avoid jobs with really fast multi-tasking, such as a super busy take-out window. Some good beginning jobs are bagging groceries, or working in a quiet office or retail store. Half of all good jobs are obtained through contacts, such as a friend who works for the company. This approach is often more successful than the "front door" interview approach. You may know somebody who owns an ice cream shop or hobby store. Many parents have told me that their children blossomed once they started working.

Having working skills gives an individual purpose in life. Help your child develop life skills and other useful skills that are appropriate for work. Stretch your child, and don't be afraid to push him/her. I think your child will surprise you. Help your child find purpose in life. I heard about a young adult who was searching for employment. Although he was non-verbal and needed many supports, he found a job at a local restaurant rolling the silverware in napkins. He was really good at his job. He was needed. He excelled and thrived. He found purpose in his life. Help your child find his/her purpose, whether that be as a computer programmer, an auto mechanic or a silverware roller.

## Different Kinds of Minds

Many different kinds of thinking exist. There were some really great minds and thinkers in the past. What would have happened to them if they were in today's educational system? Michelangelo was a lousy student and dropped out in sixth grade. Beethoven wrote some of his greatest works when he was half deaf. Different thinkers exist, and their skills can be complementary. One is not better than another, just different. I would divide thinkers into the following categories:



**VISUAL THINKERS** are great at solving problems. They are great at building things and at art, and are mechanically minded. I have had some brain scans and I am definitely a visual thinker. I am terrible at algebra and lack working memory, but I have a huge memory for graphic files.



**PATTERN THINKERS** typically excel at music, mathematics and computer programming. They are usually very good at doing math in their head, but might be terrible at showing their work in writing. They may be poor readers and do not think in pictures.

## FACTS

**WORD THINKERS** typically excel at history and sports statistics. They love facts.



**AUDITORY THINKERS** learn best from hearing information.

The kind of thinker that a child is will typically reveal itself around the second or third grade. We need all of these minds. We need to work together to create and develop our future.

I am worried about children in today's society. The minds of autistic children are needed. Unfortunately, many of these children are playing video games in the basement instead of exploring skills that could be developed into rewarding futures and careers.

The only sure way to explore your child's interests is to replace the video games with other activities. Expose your child to as many skills, opportunities, hobbies and interests as possible. How did I get interested in the cattle industry? I was exposed to it when I was 15 years old. It is important for parents to read lots of books to their children. Give them as many hands-on projects as possible. Teach them to work at a young age. Expose them to different careers; teach them how to code; go on adventures and discover something new. Let them tinker with old electronics. Reach out to people in the community to see if they can teach you about their careers or industries.

Unfortunately, many school systems are eliminating hands-on activities, such as music, art, sewing, cooking, band, woodworking, theatre, auto shop and creative writing. This now puts the onus on parents, especially those with an autistic child, to expose their child to these skills. We need all the different kinds of minds. The pattern thinkers calculate risk, but the visual thinkers can visualize the problems. The skills can work together, and the world needs all kinds of minds.

### Starting Early

Another key component to success is starting some type of therapy or intervention immediately if a child has delayed speech. I am not interested in discussing the various kinds of therapy. Suffice it to say that *some* type of therapy, with an effective teacher, should be initiated as early as possible. An effective teacher should be someone who engages with your child, who teaches him/her how to take turns, who imitates your child, who initiates communication, and who teaches basic skills. Ideally, the teacher should work with your child for two to three hours a day.

Where services are unavailable, too costly, or if you find your child on a waiting list, look for other options. Read books, such as my own, titled, "The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's." Learn some techniques yourself, or recruit a grandmother from your church or the community to spend time with your child each day working on the items mentioned above. Doing *something*, at whatever capacity you are able, is better than doing *nothing*.

### Understanding Autism

Some parents are autistic themselves, but many are not. Although every child with autism is different, there are some common features that can help you understand your autistic child. The first is sensory differences. Many children with autism have sensory sensitivities. When you are at a grocery store or a family gathering, you may hear what you think is a friendly noise. For your child, however, it will seem like the volume is extremely loud. In some offices, the lighting has a slight flicker. While this may not even be noticeable to you, it may trigger a "fight or flight" response in your child. Recognizing that the sensations in your environment may be extreme for your child is a valuable key to understanding your child's daily experiences.



"Give them as many hands-on projects as possible."



A second key to understanding your child's mind is to consider the fact that they are likely less social and emotional than you. When you heard about the ship that was stuck in the Suez Canal, you might have been worried about the individuals affected by not receiving cargo. My visual thinking mind, however, went immediately to problem-solving the logistics of the lodged container ship. I found the experience very interesting. I am not as interested in people and emotions as I am in watching a live feed of the docking of the space station. Embrace the type of mind that your child has, and don't push him/her to be as social and emotional as you are. Remember, however, that your child still needs to learn basic social skills, such as being polite and knowing how to greet people.

The final piece to raising your child is to recognize that friendships are important and valuable for your child. The best way to foster friendships is to find other children with shared interests – another reason why exposing your child to different skills and opportunities is so important. I was bullied and teased in high school, but I had friends at horseback riding and at my model rocket club. I had friends who built electronics with me. These were the places I had friends. Your child might find friends in band or in the school play. Expose your child to as many interests as possible so that he/she will have the opportunity to make valuable friendships.

This can be a difficult journey. My advice is to find a local parent support group. Join with those who are in similar circumstances. Ask for help. Reach out to your church or your community, and seek those who are willing to offer support. Asking for help is hard, but it's what you need to do. I have been in this field long enough to know that the parents can't do this by themselves. Take care of yourselves and do the best you can for your children. Their future is bright, and their potential is in your hands.

### References

1. Grandin, Temple. (2020). *The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's*: Revised and Expanded, 5th Edition. Future Horizons Inc. Arlington, TX. ISBN-9781949177312



Temple Grandin is a Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. Facilities she has designed for handling livestock are used by many companies around the world. She has also been instrumental in implementing animal welfare auditing programs that are used by McDonald's, Wendy's, Whole Foods, and other corporations. Temple has appeared on numerous TV shows such as 20/20, Larry King Live, and Prime Time. Her books include: *Thinking in Pictures*, *Livestock Handling and Transport* and *The Autistic Brain*. Her book *Animals in Translation* has been on the New York Times Bestseller List. Temple was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in September 2017.

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