

Want to Raise Successful Kids? Science Says These 7 Habits Lead to Great Outcomes

It's not just one study. It's study after study after study.

BY [BILL MURPHY JR. @BILLMURPHYJR](#)

I've long been on mission to collect science-based parenting advice, and share it both here in my column on Inc.com and in my continuously updated (free) e-book, *How to Raise Successful Kids*, which is now in its 7th edition.

Here's a short list of just a few of the most interesting and useful studies that I've found, and the habits they suggest for successful parents:

1. Don't let up on them.

This is a difficult one, and it goes right to the core of many parents' frustration.

But, in short: Set high expectations, and be consistent in your messaging, even when you get eye-rolling (or worse) in reply.

It's based on a study out of Great Britain that looked at 15,000 young women over 10 years, which found that kids whose parents "habitually reminded them of their high expectations," were:

- less likely to be unemployed for long periods of time as adults;
- less likely to wind up working in low-wage, dead-end jobs that they hated;
- more likely to obtain a college education; and
- less likely to become pregnant while they're still teenagers.

As a colleague of mine put it after reading this article:

"Sure, having a healthy sense of self-esteem and believing that you have options is great, but not getting pregnant just because you 'don't want to hear it' is fine with us, too. Whatever. Just make it not be so."

2. Praise them like this.

Parents often praise their kids, quite naturally, for their talents.

- You're so smart (or talented, etc.)!
- You're so kind and good to people.
- You're really strong (or fast or agile)!

In short, don't do that. Or, at least, don't only do that.

The work of Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck has shown that it's far more effective over time to praise kids for the effort they put into things, as opposed to their innate abilities.

Study after study shows why. But for purposes of this summary, just remember:

- Not something like: "You're such a good painter!"
- But instead, "I am so impressed by the effort you put into that painting, and it turned out so beautifully!"

3. Do it more often than you might think.

A study out of Brigham Young University looked at praise and criticism in elementary school classes. Researchers sat in on 20-minute classroom sessions over and over again for three years, tracking how teachers interacted with 2,536 students between kindergarten and first grade.

In short, the more thoughtful praise teachers gave the students, the better they performed, regardless of other factors. While the researchers said teachers have traditionally been encouraged to aim for a 3:1 or 4:1 ratio of praise to criticism, as lead study author Paul Caldarella put it: "There is no particular ratio. The higher the praise the better the results."

Of course, this is in the classroom, not the home. But ask yourself: Do I respond better over time to thoughtful praise, or to criticism?

4. Make them do chores.

This one combines two studies, to reach a fascinating result. In short, the Harvard Grant Study, which is the longest running longitudinal study in history, found two keys that people need in order to be happy and successful:

1. Love.
2. Work ethic.

That's it. We'll focus here on the second one, because the consensus from the study about how to develop work ethic is to form a "pitch-in mindset" as a kid.

And the key, structured way to develop that mindset is to be required as a child to do household chores. (Julie Lythcott-Haims, the former dean of freshmen at Stanford University, made this point memorably in her 2016 TED talk.)

The drawback? Kids, especially young kids, don't always do chores well. I'll bet you could sweep the floor more easily and faster, right?

Insist that they do it anyway. It's not just about having a clean floor. It's about learning to have a happy life.

5. Rush to their side.

This study solves a dilemma that I think a lot of parents face at times. It goes like this:

If my child gets hurt, or makes a mistake, or faces a big challenge, should I?

- a. Rush to his or her side, offering consolation?
- b. Maintain a bit of distance, so as to help them learn to be self-reliant?

A survey of several studies leads to a single conclusion: rush to their side and offer consolation.

This doesn't mean "solve all their problems for them," but it means express empathy, and let them know clearly that you care. Across the studies, researchers found that adults who remembered their parents as more aligned with the first reaction were usually "more socially well-adjusted."

6. Pay attention to their social abilities.

You're probably going to do this anyway, if you can, but a fascinating study published in the journal JAMA Pediatrics correlated the degree to which kindergarteners were rated as "prosocial" with their financial success 30 years later.

Kindergarten teachers in Montreal were asked to track their students in areas like, inattention, hyperactivity, oppositional behavior, physical aggression, and finally prosociality.

This was Canada, not the United States, and so the researchers were able to get access to the students' tax returns 30 years later, for scientific purposes. The result?

Those who were rated highest for prosociality as kindergartners made an average of \$12,000 a year more than those who had been rated low, three decades earlier.

This is all more of a diagnosis than a cure, but I talked with one of the researchers, who strongly believed that working with young kids who were not "prosocial," whether it was through providing quality day care, special attention at school, or other strategies, would likely pay off in terms of future economic stability.

Whatever else we want for our kids, I think we all want that.

7. Upend your life for them (if needed).

I don't like the result of this study, particularly. And every time I've written about, I've found parents who express a different view.

But a study published in the journal *American Sociological Review* looked at how very wealthy families, who could theoretically give their kids any advantage money can buy, choose to spend their wealth.

The number one thing they did to give their kids a big advantage? Move to a neighborhood that is as advantageous to them as possible. The sociologists phrased this as moving to a neighborhood with other wealthy people.

But having reflected on this, I think they might want to break down the conclusions a bit, and instead talk about moving to neighborhoods with:

- physical safety
- good schools
- good role models

You might define those factors different than other parents, and two parents looking at the same neighborhood might rate them differently.

But in short? If you're going to spend money on one big thing to improve your kids' chances of success, pick the right place to live, and do what you have to, in order to move there.