



# Happy, Successful Teens

Life skills that help your teen succeed



**Allstate**  
Foundation



# From Teen to Grown Up

HELPING YOUR TEEN BUILD LIFE SKILLS THAT BRING SUCCESS IN COLLEGE AND THEIR CAREER.

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## Here's why it's okay if your teen is not ready for the “real world” (Hint: Most teens aren't)



Recently my 16-year-old daughter told me she needed a haircut. So I said, “Great, call the salon and book it.” Her response: “I never know what to say. Can you do it for me?” Immediately I thought, how is she going to handle college—roommates, the huge courseload, money, the exams—if she can’t manage to book an appointment? If you have a teenager, you’ve probably had some version of the same parent panic attack. Here’s the good news. My teen will learn these basic life skills and so will yours. They’re just going to need some practice.

Learning from failure, being able to manage their emotions, and being kind are key “adulting” skills we all had to learn on the road to becoming grownups. Along the way we had to learn how to work with others—to get along with difficult people, empathize, and find compromise. It’s not easy. These are social emotional skills that will be used over the course of a lifetime. They aren’t simple and they certainly can’t be learned all at once.

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The Allstate Foundation empowers young people – and those that guide and teach them – with social and emotional skills to build character and transform lives. Learn more at [www.allstatefoundation.org](http://www.allstatefoundation.org)

## What is SEL anyway?

These skills that feel so hard to pin down and teach are called social and emotional skills. The process of learning them is called social-emotional learning or SEL. SEL is the process through which people understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL.org).

## It starts with strong family connections.

Research shows that teens who feel connected to their families and communities are the ones who persist through challenges, take calculated risks, and set and achieve goals. Once you have given your child a strong foundation, it's time to step back and encourage them to negotiate some new situations on their own. That often means asking encouraging questions ("How can you get greater clarity on the assignment?") instead of solving the problem for them ("I'll go ahead and

email your teacher.") Letting go can be tough, but imagine your pride when you see your child navigating new territory on their own.

## Set the stage for increasing independence.

Want to help your child learn to navigate unfamiliar situations? Encourage them to practice in low stakes situations. Have them figure out the steps needed to make things happen. Ask questions like: "What terms would you google? What do you think you could do next?" When kids map out the steps needed to solve their problems, they get better each time. Recently I gave my 13-year-old daughter our grocery list and asked her to load up the cart and check out. She was surprised. When she had questions, I said, "What do you think you should do?" When we got home, she told her dad all about how she did the grocery shopping. I could tell it made her realize she is capable. What could you try with your teen?

Building SEL skills can help teens develop a stronger sense of self.

In this guide, we'll explore the five major areas of SEL and highlight ways we as parents can encourage kids to flex those muscles during the course of daily family life. Teenagers who get better at SEL skills can develop a stronger, more resilient sense of self. And that's no small thing for kids lurching toward adulthood, as they navigate the difficult decisions, challenging coursework, and whipsaw emotions of the in-between teenage years.



## Teaching your teen SEL skills takes time and practice (and patience), but it's worth it!

In short, SEL skills increase what we want for our teens, and decreases the outcomes we don't want. Here's what we know about the payoff:

- » When children have been taught SEL skills, their academic performance is better, up to 13 percentile points higher, than those who haven't learned the same skills.
- » Children who learn SEL had higher high school and college graduation rates.
- » Children who have been taught SEL have more emotional abilities, and fewer negative outcomes, like drug use, mental health concerns, and teen pregnancy.
- » Young adults with strong SEL skills are better equipped to succeed in the workplace. They have the skills that employers want to see!
- » The benefits of SEL learning are long lasting. The effects have been evaluated at 6 months and 18 years after kids were taught SEL ([www.CASEL.org](http://www.CASEL.org)).





# Getting from “I’m not good at it!” to “I’ll improve with practice.”

Consider two ways that your teen can respond to a challenge, say not making a goal on the soccer field. They could get frustrated, declare, “I was never any good at soccer anyway!” and refuse to play. Or, they could feel a stab of disappointment, tell themselves, “that was a tough shot, I’ll have to practice that angle some more,” and keep playing. In the second response, the teen has self-awareness and a growth mindset—the ability to look honestly at their abilities and form a realistic, positive

self-image focused on learning and getting better.

Kids with a growth mindset focus on how their effort can help them reach their goals, rather than whether they are inherently good or bad at something. They are able to persist through challenges because they have faith in their ability to change and grow. When your teen realizes a tough test is coming up and seeks out tutoring and extra study time instead of giving up, they are using a growth mindset and showing self-awareness.

Fortunately, we know that teens can develop and strengthen their self-awareness and growth mindset. In one study, when a group of teens were taught about growth mindset, their effort and motivation towards their schoolwork increased (Blackwell, Treziesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). And, in another large study, teens who were taught to have a growth mindset had higher test scores than those who didn’t (Yeager et al., 2019). Growth mindset gives our kids the persistence they’ll need to tackle life’s challenges.

## SELF-AWARENESS

### Talk to your teen with growth mindset in mind

When your teen says:	You say:
“I’m so bad at math.”	“You just haven’t learned that yet. Try again.”
“I failed that quiz.”	“What did you learn from the quiz?”
“She’s one of the smart kids.”	“She must work really hard at school.”



Nurturing a child's self-awareness may take paying more attention to your own.

# Praise the Process

**When it comes to developing self-awareness, our teens are listening to what we say, and watching what we do. Use these tested tools to communicate with your teen.**

## Things to Try

### Praise Effort

A teen who sticks with something—studying for a tough quiz, completing a project they really disliked—deserves recognition. The key is in praising the effort, not the outcome.

- » You can say, “I know you worked really hard on that, it wasn’t easy, but you finished it. I’m proud of you.”
- » Or, “I saw how hard that was for you, that takes a lot of perseverance to keep going.”
- » Or, ask: “What made you keep working even when you wanted to quit?”

### Be a Model

Share stories of how you faced challenges and were persistent. Or, call out your mistakes and talk about how you moved past a misstep. Acknowledge the feelings that come up when you’re working through something difficult—frustration, annoyance, irritation—and talk about how those feelings passed by too.

- » You can say, “I remember really struggling with that when I was your age, but then I...”
- » You can ask, “I noticed that when I said that, you shut down. How can I talk to you differently if that happens again?”

### Find Openings

Listen as your teen talks to you and try to find a way to bring up confidence and taking on challenges.

- » Share strategies that you use now at work or at home. You can say, “When I’m dreading a task at work, I try to plan it for first thing in the morning so I can do it and then move on to other things I enjoy more.”
- » You can invite your child into the conversation too: “What kind of music practice schedule do you think would work for you?”



# Keeping Emotions in Check

Stories and strategies to help teenagers keep calm and carry on

**A**t times, it seems like adolescent emotions come in two temperatures: boiling hot and freezing cold. Through self-management, teenagers can learn to maintain happier mediums, not just by recognizing their feelings, but also by regulating those emotions, managing stress, and resisting impulsive behaviors.

Self-management allows kids to choose how they will react to a set of circumstances, based on their enhanced understanding of themselves.

These skills help teenagers choose constructive, positive actions and reactions.



## Self-Management = Impulse Control

Watch for times your teen stays calm and focused during a tough time. Then give positive feedback, like:

- I love how you kept practicing even though you weren't chosen for the team.
- It shows kindness when you stop to invite others in like that.
- Learning to study is paying off for you, even when you don't get the score you wanted.

### SELF-MANAGEMENT

## How to encourage self-management in your teen

When your teen says:	You say:
"I'm so frustrated."	"I see you are choosing not to yell. That's great."
"That guy is a jerk."	"Some people behave badly. Let's plan for how you can react differently."
"I hate trigonometry."	"Let's think of how to make it less stressful."



# Ask the Right Questions

We could all stand to listen more than we talk. Lecture less and ask more questions. Try these conversation starters to get your child talking.

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| » If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go? | » What is your earliest memory?                            | » Why do you think people stop being friends?                             |
| » What qualities do you look for in a best friend?               | » Would you rather live near water, sand, or mountains?    | » What do you think everyone should do before they turn 18?               |
| » What would your perfect day consist of?                        | » What's the high point and low point of your life so far? | » How many times have you told a lie because it was the best alternative? |
| » What is your favorite memory of us?                            | » What would you donate \$1,000 to support?                | » What is worth saving money for?   |
| » What makes you embarrassed?                                    | » What is your most loved item of clothing?                | » Do you think it's hard to be a parent?                                  |
| » What is one food you never get sick of?                        | » Where is your favorite spot to spend time?               | » Is it hard to be a teenager?  |
| » What's the best book you ever read?                            | » What is the most important thing about you?              | » Who is the luckiest person in the world?                                |



# “That’s not fair!”

## Helping teens develop social awareness

**T**eens may seem completely self-absorbed, but they are more empathetic and aware than we first realize. When your teen is empathetic to the plight of a classmate, responds to the mood in the room, and talks about how people from other backgrounds may feel, they’re demonstrating social awareness. Their social awareness also plays out in an obsession with fairness, which can be a powerful window into the perspectives of others.

When your teen reacts strongly about what’s fair or not, your initial reaction may be to lecture. Resist

that urge and try these strategies instead:

### » Listen more than you talk.

When your teen notices that you’re listening without judging, they’ll be more likely to open up. And, you’ll find out why they think something is unfair.

### » Ask more than answer.

For example, when talking about fairness, ask your teen what they see and why they think it happens. Don’t offer advice unless they ask for it.

### » Hand over the reins.

Invite your child to create rules for their social life and what they think would be fair. What time do they think they should be home? How often should they check in with you? What are some consequences for infractions? Once they’re part of the plan, they may understand why the rules are in place.



## Make Problem-Solving Interesting

Here are some great ways to help solve unfair issues.

**I Cut, You Pick:** One person gets to cut the piece of cake (or whatever) and the other person gets to choose which one to eat.

**Tit for Tat:** Whatever one person does, the other person has to do the same thing. One washes five dishes, the other person washes five of something.

**Random Dictator:** Put names in a hat and randomly choose one. That person gets to make the decisions for the day or evening or moment.

**Auction:** Can’t decide who chooses the one show that will be watched tonight? Try auctioning the desired reward to the highest bidder, using chores or other privileges as currency.

**Trade Places:** Each person has to tell what happened from the other person’s perspective.

# Teaching Teens To Be Kind

Creating strong and caring ties to self, family, and community

**K**indness—listening to others, considering others, including everyone—is a trait the we want our kids to have. In a 2014 Harvard study, 96% of parents said they wanted their children to be kind. Unfortunately, this is not translating to our kids. 81% said they thought their parents valued achievement and happiness more than kindness. Here are four reasons to focus on kindness:

- » Kindness is the foundation for strong relationships. In particular, reacting positively and enthusiastically to others' successes fuels strong relationships.
- » When people are kind, they have a lower risk of dying in the next five years than those who are not.
- » Performing acts of kindness increases happiness, and that happiness lingers for a month after even one kind act.
- » Being kind reduces feelings of anxiety and depression.

## Sneaky acts of kindness

Inject kindness into your teen's day

1. Put a kind note into their lunchbox or slip it into a textbook like a bookmark.
2. Send them a text of encouragement at a time in the day you know they'll need it the most.
3. Switch from your radio station to theirs when they get in the car.
4. Have their favorite snack ready when they get home.



Kindness can be taught.  
Here's how:

- » **Focus on things they already do.** Your teen already does kind things throughout the day. They stick up for someone in class discussion. They make a nice comment on a cousin's Facebook post. Acknowledge the ways that your teen is already being kind and how it makes others feel.
- » **Encourage small acts of kindness.** Start by modeling small things, like smiling a greeting or saying "hi" to every neighbor you pass on a walk.
- » **Start volunteering as a family.** Take time to help out around your community, and encourage your teen to start volunteer work of their own. They can volunteer with an organization they care about—an animal shelter for a pet loving teen or the school sports clinic for an athlete.
- » **Show gratitude.** Take time to write thank you notes or give a thank you call when someone else acts kindly to your family. This includes your teen—take time to thank them for how they are kind to you.





# Community Starts at Home

Teenagers need allies, and that starts with you. Trusting, conversing with, and respecting your teenager will create a foundation for growing relationship skills.

## Things to Try

**Be a trusted resource—and show your teen trust as well.**

» **Let your teen make more decisions.**

Leave lower-consequences choices in their hands. For example, should your teen take a cooking or a sewing elective this year? Let them decide.

» **Let your teen experience things alone.**

Don't hover. If you let them use homebase as a testing ground, they will know what to do when they are on their own, but will stay safe.

» **Be there when they need you.**

Promise they can always call for help or a ride home, no questions asked, and keep your word. The more they know they can trust you when things go wrong, the more confident they will be.

**Create explicit opportunities for unstructured family activities and communication.**

» **Play games.** Playing board or card games is a great way to get kids talking. While kids are distracted with the game, you won't believe the things they are willing to talk about.

» **Sit together.** If board games are too much for a shy adolescent, play a video game together or simply sit and watch a movie—their pick. Check out the conversation starters on page 8.

» **Ask for help.** Invite them to help with routine physical tasks that foster cooperation, like holding supplies during window washing or helping to rake and bag leaves.

**Talk about the relationships in your life, and invite your teenager to discuss the relationships in theirs.**

» **Tell teens about your relationships.**

Discuss your friendships and family relationships, including the mutual respect and understanding that protects those bonds. Ask about their feelings, but resist giving advice.

» **Talk about relationships on TV.**

If that's too personal for your teen, look to other sources of content to color the conversation: binge-watch a TV series together and talk through the dynamics.

» **Ask teens about the relationships they see.**

We're surrounded by relationships. Take the heat off your teen by asking about other people and how they get along.

# Learning to Make Smart Choices

Making responsible decisions means choosing constructive solutions in the face of a challenge.

## Where SEL skills come together

Our teens make thousands of decisions each day, both small (what to have for lunch) and big (which party invitation to accept). Decision-making is where all the SEL skills come together. Smart decision-makers understand themselves, accurately assess the social environment, look beyond their emotions, and consider other people's reactions to their choice. Then, they're able to take action and see it through. It's no easy feat.

Over time, the decisions that your teen makes will determine the direction and quality of their life. Help your teen make decisions by teaching them to question themselves through each choice.

- » Why do I want to do this? Help your child understand the motivation behind their decision.
- » What are my options? Knowing their choices helps kids connect with moral right and wrong.
- » What happens if I do this? This question gets at the consequences of our decisions, both good and bad.
- » Is this a good decision for me? Teens should also be thinking about making decisions that are in their best interest.



## Fun ways to develop decision making

- » Give teens a hypothetical moral dilemma to solve. What would you do if... questions encourage teens to be creative in their thinking and problem solving.
- » Give teens power over small choices. Give them a budget and have them plan the weekly dinner menus or let them plan one day of a family vacation. Taking on these small choices helps teens work through the entire decision-making process without high stakes.
- » Play strategic board games. Classic games like chess and Monopoly, and newer board games too, focus on decision making that can have big consequences within the game (though not in the real world).





# Practice Makes Perfect

**Kids can't make wise decisions if they never have the chance to practice**, and they won't learn to choose wisely if they don't experience the consequences for failing to do so. Give your teen the room and responsibility to make decisions that affect their daily life.

## Things to Try

### »» Natural consequences

If your child forgets their lunch, homework, or instrument, don't bring it to school. Let them identify, experience, and learn from their mistakes. Stay calm, and let them know you're confident they'll get it right the next time.

### »» Small doses of freedom

Consider giving teens a chance to balance personal freedom with responsibility to others, by walking around town or the mall on their own or with a friend.

### »» Low stakes responsibility

Let their problems be their own. The next time your teen shares a challenge with you, express concern but not dismay—and don't try to solve it. Let your teen figure out what to do next.

### »» Knowledge is power

Does your teen have a smartphone? Have a candid conversation about location tracking, and talk through reasons that it should and should not be enabled.

### »» Family decision-making

Take advantage of adolescent concerns to put some family decision-making power into kids' hands. If your teen criticizes meal choices, screen-time rules, or weekend scheduling, invite them to diagnose shortcomings and discuss or propose alternatives with the entire family's needs in mind. Ask questions that prompt thinking through causes and effects and whether their choices fairly affect others.

# We believe in better for all.



**Use these resources to support your engagement with SEL at home:**



The Allstate Foundation empowers young people, parents and educators with SEL and service-learning opportunities: [allstatefoundation.org](https://allstatefoundation.org)



CASEL offers tips for how parents can model SEL skills at home: [casel.org/homes-and-communities](https://casel.org/homes-and-communities)



Inner Explorer helps kids and parents incorporate mindfulness in to their daily lives with their family app: [innerexplorer.org](https://innerexplorer.org)



WeAreTeachers has resources to help parents of teens to take SEL from the classroom, to home: [weareteachers.com/social-and-emotional-learning-in-grades-6-12](https://weareteachers.com/social-and-emotional-learning-in-grades-6-12)