



Raising Your Learning-Challenged Child to Become A Happy, Resourceful, and Emotionally Healthy Adult

We at Morrissey-Compton were thrilled to have **Julie Lythcott-Haims**, author of *How to Raise an Adult* and host of the podcast “Getting In,” agree to answer four questions designed to help parents of children with learning differences let go of their own biases to strive towards guiding their child to become his or her own person:



Q: How does one encourage a child with learning challenges without taking on too much responsibility for his or her success?

A: We all have big—even lofty—dreams for our kids, but at their most concrete those dreams boil down to wanting our kids to be capable of thriving without us when the time comes. A kid with significant learning challenges may not be capable of the complete independence enjoyed by a person developing typically, but that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t do everything they possibly can for themselves. And that’s what we should want for them.



Framed that way, our definition of success has little to do with the specific college our kids attend or the career they undertake, and a whole lot to do with whether they have the wherewithal to be successful wherever they go. Things like the ability to get themselves up, care for themselves, keep track of their belongings and obligations, advocate for their own needs, treat others with kindness, work hard, act responsibly, and earn a living are the building blocks for real success. If we regularly handle things kids should learn to do for themselves—i.e. when we do some of their homework, remind them to put their stuff in their backpacks, ferry the forgotten lunch to school, track their upcoming deadlines, take an issue up with a teacher—sure, we’ll probably achieve a short-term win for them. But they aren’t learning to do for themselves, which can really come back to bite them in the long run, both because they won’t have the necessary skills and because our over-involvement will have taught them that they’re not capable of accomplishing things without us.

My point is, we aren’t responsible for achieving success for our child (and if we think we are, that’s our own ego getting in the way). We’re responsible for teaching our kids the habits, frame of mind, and techniques that pave the way for them to be successful in their own right. We should act as role

models for hard work, perseverance, and resilience, and then teach them important tools such as time management, how to chunk big projects into small tasks, how to make checklists and to-do lists, how to move on from a setback, and how to relax and kick back for a bit after a job well done.

Q: How do you communicate with your high school children in a manner that increases their college options to include the types of colleges that aren't elite, but can change your life?

A: Many of us have been duped by *U.S. News & World Report* into thinking that only a tiny number of colleges matter. If we've bought into that mindset, then we feel we have no choice but to try to engineer those college outcomes for our kids at all costs. The trouble is, the schools at the top of the *U.S. News* list require a level of perfection in high school that means the natural blips and bumps of life are not tolerated. Kids growing up with that kind of expectation are desperately afraid of failure (often mistakenly defining it as a "B"), and if parents are obsessed over every grade, kids can feel their very worth as humans comes down to their grades and scores. This harms kids. In some cases, tremendously.

The good news is, in a nation of 2,800 accredited four-year institutions (not to mention great community colleges), there are at least a few hundred truly wonderful college options. In my own house or when I'm out on the stump for my book tour, I talk about how a college education is best when faculty are motivated to teach and mentor undergraduates, which happens all the time at small colleges, and also at community colleges, but happens less so at big universities where faculty are primarily engaged in research. Knowing that many parents lack an awareness of colleges other than those with the biggest brand names, I like to name drop the names of small colleges like **Whitman College** in Washington, **Grinnell** in Iowa, and **Carleton** in Minnesota. I also am a big fan of lists like the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* (fiskeguide.com), *Colleges That Change Lives* (ctcl.org), and *The Alumni Factor* (alumnifactor.com), which present data and information on what it's actually like to be a student on a particular campus and to be a graduate of those places (*U.S. News*, in contrast, rates schools mostly on the high school grades/scores of incoming college students).



Even if we as parents are very informed about the high-quality education to be had at many schools, we still tend to "ooh" and "aah" when someone's kid has gotten into one of those most highly selective schools. To really walk the walk, we need to check our own subtle biases—for example, do we only wear Stanford sweatshirts? If so, we're signaling to our kids that regardless of what we may say, we really hope they'll go there.

Although I'm a graduate of Stanford, worked there for over a decade, and believe it is in fact a wonderful school, I'm incredibly excited about looking at other schools with my kids—schools with far more reasonable admission rates—because I don't want them to mortgage their childhoods or adopt a perfection mentality that seems necessary for admission to a highly selective college these days. For example, my son—the kid with ADD who had the benefit of working with **Dr. Ted Alper** at Morrissey-Compton years ago—has a real penchant for biology and thinks he might want to do

bio research one day. So together, we're looking into colleges that send the greatest number of graduates to Ph.D. programs in the life sciences (I found a great list at thecollegesolution.com/the-colleges-where-phds-get-their-start). One of the top ten schools on that list is **Kalamazoo College** in Michigan, which I'll confess I'd never heard of! But I'm super excited to visit it with him when we go on a college tour later this year—he just might experience that all-important sense of fit and belonging when he's there.

That's what college admission all comes down to: fit and belonging. As a former college dean, I know that this is critical. Do they want a huge school or a close-knit community? An urban environment or the hills in the middle of nowhere? Can they see themselves thriving in that classroom, library, laboratory, or dorm? I'm excited to take my son on a college tour of places that excel in bio, but that also differ from each other in terms of student life, environment, social and political mindset, and vibe. He's the one who's going to spend four precious years there. The college visit will give him a sense of whether he can be himself on any particular campus, which is what will help ensure that those four years feel wonderful and are well spent.

Q: How can parents encourage their children to follow their own dreams rather than forcing them to follow the parent's dreams?

A: It's tempting to want to force our kids to become a "this" or "that" (Doctor! Engineer! Lawyer!), because we think that's what will lead to a successful life, or because we'll feel better about ourselves if we can brag that our kid has pursued these professions.

But really, what each of us needs is to figure out what we're good at, what we love, and what matters to us, and then to do work that plays on those strengths and taps into those values. I've worked with too many kids on a path of someone else's making and really, regardless of how well they may have been doing, they felt pretty miserable about their life. And I know from my own professional journey, which began in corporate law, that money and prestige don't fill your soul. Yes, you need a certain amount of money to pay your bills, but the more your work is aligned with your skills, passion, and values, the more rewarding it will be, and the more rewarding it is, the more you can feel satisfied from the work itself even if the paycheck isn't huge. So, I want my two kids to feel fulfilled in a career that matters to them.

Mostly, at an existential level, I think we have to humble ourselves as parents and accept and embrace that our kid is their own human. Too many of us are still trying to please our parents or win their approval. Why put that burden on our kids? Too many of us are trying to make our kids into some perfect version of a kid we may have dreamed about, instead of embracing the kid we have. Let's give our kids all the opportunities we can and create high expectations that they'll be hard workers and of good character, while keeping firmly in mind that it's their life, not ours, which means they get to dream their own dreams.

Q: Can you give us an example of a household activity or expectation to promote resourcefulness in a child?

A: There's no substitute for chores (or a part time job) when it comes to inculcating a sense of responsibility and accountability in a kid. Resist the urge to let your kid off the hook when

schoolwork or activities get busy—this is precisely the time to teach a kid that even in busy times, all of the mundane tasks of life must still get done. A kid who learns that they must pitch in and help no matter what will be a very valued contributor in the workplace one day.

As for resourcefulness, a person only becomes resourceful when they have to figure out how to solve a problem on their own. When my husband was sick for a few days and I was traveling on my book tour, he told our two teens that they were on their own to make breakfast and lunch for themselves before the start of the school day. They grumbled until they realized they had no choice, and they figured it out. And from that one moment of discomfort, a little frustration, and a tolerance for imperfection, they now know they're capable of making a simple meal. And they don't balk anymore when we ask them to help out around the kitchen.

This is the really beautiful thing: kids want to be useful, to help out, and to feel the satisfaction of a job well done. When we stop doing for them, and teach them to do for themselves, we reap this benefit—and then some.

More About Julie Lythcott-Haims

Julie majored in American Studies at Stanford University and studied law at Harvard. She practiced law in the Bay Area in the 1990s before returning to Stanford to serve in various roles including Dean of Freshmen, a position she created and held for a decade. In her final three years at Stanford she was Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Dean of Freshmen and Undergraduate Advising, and in 2010 she received the university's Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for "creating the atmosphere that defines the undergraduate experience." Since leaving Stanford in 2012, Julie has been pursuing an MFA at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Here, in Julie's own words, is how she came to write *How to Raise an Adult*:

"I am deeply interested in humans—all of us —living lives of meaning and purpose, which requires figuring out what we're good at and what we love, and being the best version of that self we can be. So I'm interested in what gets in the way of that. I wrote this book because too many adolescents and young adults seem to be on a path of someone else's making, while being subjected to a lot of hovering and lot of help to ensure that particular path is walked, all in furtherance of a very limited and narrow definition of "success." I come at this issue from the dual vantage points of former university dean and parent of two teenagers, and with great empathy for humans."

Julie also writes creative non-fiction, poetry, short stories, and plays. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, teenagers, and mother.

For additional information, visit howtoraiseanadult.com.