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*Five Skills Your Child
Needs to Thrive and the
One Parent Skill that
Builds Them All*

Alan E Nelson, EdD



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DEDICATION

To Nancy: your steady encouragement, wisdom, and belief in people shaped far more of this book than words can express.

To Jeff, Josh, and Jesse: your lives not only emulate thriving, but have taught me so much about life and love.

To Juniper and Ivy: as your Papa, I hope that these words become incarnate in you and that you flourish as a result.

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Chapter 1

Your Child Deserves to Thrive

The Eureka Event Behind this Book

A journey of 1000 miles begins...

A philosopher once said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” True. But as a leadership professor, I’d suggest something equally important: a meaningful journey begins with the end in mind. People follow leaders all the time without fully understanding where those leaders are headed, and history has shown how dangerous that can become. Leadership without vision, purpose, or moral direction rarely ends well. Parenting, whether we think of it this way or not, is also a form of leadership.

So, let me ask you a question most parents rarely stop long enough to fully consider: Where exactly do you hope your child is headed? Better yet, where are you leading them? I’m not talking about next semester,

next soccer season, or whether they make honors classes, varsity, student council, or get accepted into a prestigious college. I mean eventually, when adulthood fully arrives. When you glance into the rearview mirror after dropping them off at college and see them waving goodbye, what do you hope already exists inside them? When you set down the last box in their first apartment and drive away, what emotional capacities, habits, beliefs, and relational skills will help them thrive on their own?

At some point, every child faces life without their parents standing nearby. They experience heartbreak, betrayal, financial pressure, career disappointment, temptation, uncertainty, and personal failure. Some navigate those seasons with resilience and maturity, while others unravel under the weight of them. As parents, we cannot control every future outcome, but we can help shape the internal architecture they carry into adulthood. That, ultimately, is how we should be parenting today: with the future adult in mind.

What thriving looks like

This realization became unexpectedly clearer for me while sitting in room 102 of the Hotel Royal Prisco in Positano, Italy. My wife Nancy and I were on a three-week trip through the French Riviera, the Amalfi Coast, and Greece, pre-celebrating our 45th wedding anniversary. Nancy loves endless walking on international trips, so I gladly encouraged her to wander the crowded pathways and shops lining the cliffs above the Mediterranean while I slipped back to our room overlooking the sea. For

days during that trip, I had been doing something both fascinating and slightly unsettling: using artificial intelligence to help me sift through over twenty years of thinking, teaching, and writing on young leader training that eventually led to this book on thriving.

Thriving looks like the eight-year-old who figures out a workaround when the first plan fails, and the thirteen-year-old who disagrees with a coach and says so without blowing up the relationship. It's the preteen who owns a mistake before anyone calls them on it, without blaming others or pointing fingers. The one who keeps showing up when a project gets hard. The teenager who works well with others to get things done. It's the ten-year-old who stands up for a peer who's getting picked on. Those aren't personality traits you're born with. They're skills. And the good news is that thriving can be taught.

The gap between that vision and the parenting advice most of us actually receive is wide. We get a lot of guidance on managing behavior, improving grades, reducing screen time, and surviving adolescence. Very little of it is aimed at the grown person on the other end of the process. This book is.

How I got here

Since 2005, I have been designing and using these programs to help young people develop leadership skills. I taught leadership courses at the university level as well as training thousands of young people, and watched patterns emerge over time about which kids grew into capable, grounded young adults and which ones struggled. So, sitting in that hotel

room with a view of the Mediterranean and too much espresso, something clicked, an epiphany of sorts. The activities and experiences I had spent two decades building were not only producing leaders. They were developing young people who could communicate, collaborate, recover from failure, solve problems, and take initiative. In short, children, preteens and teens who could thrive. I had been seeing leadership as the destination when it was primarily a vehicle to key life skills.

History is full of people who went looking for one thing and found something more useful. Penicillin turned up when a scientist came back from vacation to find mold on a forgotten petri dish. The microwave oven came from a radar engineer who noticed a chocolate bar melting in his pocket. Post-it Notes started as a failed attempt at ultra-strong adhesive. Progress has a habit of arriving sideways. This book is a version of that same story. I thought I was helping children become leaders. What I also found was a way to help them grow into capable, resilient adults. And the parents who understood the method, even instinctively, were the ones whose kids seemed to arrive in adulthood ready for it.

About this book

After decades of observing families, teaching leadership, raising three sons, and watching thousands of young people develop over time, I've become convinced that five specific skills consistently separate young adults who thrive from those who don't. Throughout this book, I'll call

them simply “The Five.” They are not a checklist or a personality type. They are abilities that can be developed.

I also want to be honest about where this comes from. My wife Nancy and I raised three sons, and like any parent who’s been at it long enough to become reflective, I can see the moments we handled well and the ones we didn’t. Nobody gets this right every time. This book is not the product of flawless parenting. It’s the result of decades of observation, teaching, occasional mistakes, and eventually patterns seen clearly enough to codify them in this book and an online course.

You are more influential in your child’s development than any teacher, coach, school, faith leader, or screen they will ever encounter. That is not a guilt trip. It is the most encouraging thing I know to tell a parent, because it means the key work is already within your reach. This book is about helping you do it with more intention and impact.

Whether your child is still in grade school, grinding through middle school, or starting to ponder college, there is time. And there is a way. Let’s start there. Good parents want their children to thrive. Great ones take intentional steps to make that happen. Congratulations on reading this book as part of your legacy.

How this book works

The book is organized around a simple promise and the path that delivers it.

Part I: The Five Skills that Define Thriving. The next six chapters introduce The Five thrive skills. We'll explain them one at a time, in enough depth that you'll recognize each one in your child by the time you finish. We offer a short assessment so you can see where your young person stands on each. Not as a clinical score. As a working map of where to focus.

Part II: The One Skill You Need. The Five skills don't develop in every setting. School grows some. Sports can exercise a few. Chores do little. Part II makes the case for the one developmental vehicle that exercises all five at the same time, in everyday situations with real consequences, every single time. It's the part of the book where the argument has to be earned, not assumed. By the end of Part II, you'll know what the vehicle is and why it works.

Part III: How to Do It. The practical playbook. How to size the weight to your child's age, aptitude and ability. When to step in, when to step back. What to say during and in the five minutes after these "reps" that instill the skills you're building. How to design the next opportunity, what to do when your young person resists, and how to coach without taking over. Part III gives you specifics to start the day after you finish the book.

Three parts. One arc. The destination, the vehicle, and your role as parent at the wheel.

Part I:

Their Five Skills

Chapter 2

The Five Skills Needed

Setting Them Up to Succeed in Life

This book is about five words

Five words that describe what it looks like when a young person is thriving. Not impressive. Not winning. Not the easiest one in the room. Thriving. The kind that holds up at 6 and still at 66, that travels with your child into every classroom, friendship, job, and marriage they'll ever have.

Resourceful. Responsible. Resilient. Communicative. Collaborative.

Five skills. One vehicle. A thriving kid, preteen, and teen. That's the whole book. These aren't personality traits. They aren't mysteries reserved for naturally gifted youth, and they aren't handed out at birth

in unequal portions. They're skills. Trained capacities. Like any skill, they can be built on purpose, in any child, by parents who know what they're looking at.

A young person who has these five doesn't need to be a star. They don't need to peak early, win prizes, or fit any particular mold. What they have is something more durable, a working set of abilities for life. When the instructions run out, they figure it out. They can carry weight without buckling, keep moving when things turn sideways, make themselves understood, and pull a group toward something it couldn't have made alone. That's thriving. It's not a personality your child either has or doesn't. It's a skill set, and skill sets get built.

The good news is that these skills are most teachable in the years your child is in your home. We'll get to which decade is the most strategic. For now, the window is real, the work is doable, and the parent who knows what to aim at has an advantage almost nobody else has.

Skills, not traits

It's worth being precise about that word, skill, because some readers will look at The Five and see something else. They'll see personality, or talent, or character. The distinction matters, so let me set three terms side by side: temperament, aptitude, and skill. The Five are skills. They are not the other two, and the difference is the reason this book can promise what it does.

Temperament is personality, the way a child is wired socially and emotionally. Whole libraries of books and assessments map it, from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to DiSC to dozens of others. Most researchers believe temperament, like fingerprints and IQ, changes little across a lifetime. It reflects who we are, how we process the world, and the particular way each of us is unique. A parent does not install temperament. Our children come with it.

Aptitude is the capacity to do a particular kind of thing well. Some people are simply gifted in certain areas. The Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner identified eight basic intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. His sharpest question wasn't "How smart are you?" but "How are you smart?" We see it early in our kids. One is a natural athlete, another reads people effortlessly, a third lives for art. I sometimes use Starbucks cup sizes to picture it. You can order a Tall, a Grande, or a Venti. A child who is a Venti in athletics will pick up a physical skill faster and further than a child who is a Tall in that same area. Every aptitude is worth developing, but we don't usually leap past the size we were given.

Skill is the third thing, and it's different in kind. A skill is learned. Unlike temperament and aptitude, which are largely set at birth, a skill can be acquired by almost anyone willing to practice it. The Five are skills. Each one is influenced by temperament and aptitude, of course. A naturally agreeable child has a head start on collaboration, a naturally bold one on

communication. But influenced is not determined. Any child, preteen, or teen can be trained in all five, if the adults around them build the right environments and coach with intention. That word, train, matters too. Training is mostly about changing behavior through practice and reps (repetitions), which is different from teaching that works mainly through cognitive input, explaining and informing. You'll see in Part III how to plant, water, and cultivate the seeds of these five skills. For now, the claim to hold onto is the simple one: because they are skills, they can be built, and you are the one positioned to do that.

One more distinction, because some readers will be waiting for it. The Five are skills, not values. This book makes no claim about what your family should believe, how it should worship, or what it should hold sacred. Those questions, including faith, ethics, character, and a child's sense of their own worth, matter enormously, and nothing here competes with them or replaces them. A value tells a child what to aim at. A skill is whether they're able to get there. The two are not rivals; they answer different questions. The Five are values-neutral capacities. They serve whatever your family already believes, and a child can hold every value you've worked to give them and still lack the ability to act on them. That gap is what this book is about.

Why these skills matter more than they used to

Throughout history, people have tended to claim that today's children and youth are softer than yesterday's. It's a tired argument and usually wrong. Every generation has thought the next was a little fragile, and for

the most part, those same kids eventually proved them wrong by what they did. So let's not start there.

What's true, and worth saying carefully, is that the conditions in which children develop these five skills have changed. A few generations ago, kids built resourcefulness, responsibility, and resilience almost by accident. They walked themselves to school. They organized their own neighborhood games and handled their own playground conflicts. They ran lemonade stands and paper routes, and did chores that mattered to the household budget. Dozens of small, real-stakes moments each week trained the load-bearing skills, and nobody needed a curriculum to make it happen.

Statistics shift over time, but here's an example of what we're talking about. One study tracking how much time parents spend interacting with their children found that, in 1965, the average mother spent about 54 minutes a day on direct childcare. By 2012 that figure had nearly doubled to 104 minutes. Fathers' time with their children nearly quadrupled in the same period, from 16 minutes a day to 59.¹ By every measure of intention, modern parents are trying harder, showing up more, and investing more deliberately than the generation that raised them.

The harder news is on the other side of the equation. The environment has changed faster than parenting has. The typical school-age child today gets only a fraction of a parent's focused, undivided attention, and spends hours a day on screens, a stretch that grows longer as a child moves from the early grades into the teenage years. A growing number

of studies warn about the steady rise in child and youth screen time and what it crowds out. Add the many hours when a parent is in the same room but multitasking, often on a screen of their own, and a clearer picture forms. Parents aren't absent. They're outnumbered. The competing pull on a child's attention has multiplied. The small unsupervised situations that used to build the load-bearing skills have thinned. The parent's hour of focused presence now has to do work that an entire neighborhood used to do alongside it.

That isn't a story of weaker kids or worse parents. It's a story of an environment that quietly stopped doing some of childhood's most important developmental work, and a generation of parents who, with the right framework, are more than capable of doing it on purpose. Schedules are tighter. Supervision is constant. Free play has shrunk. The everyday situations that used to ask a young person to figure things out, carry weight, or recover in front of peers happen less often. The kids aren't weaker. The reps are missing. And reps build skills.

There's a second reason these five matter more now, and this one looks forward. As artificial intelligence takes over more of what used to count as valuable work, the calculating, drafting, looking things up, the capacities it can't copy are the ones that will set people apart. A machine produces an answer. It doesn't carry the weight of a decision, or recover from a failure that costs something, or read a room, or hold a group of real people together when they disagree. Those are human jobs, and they happen to be The Five.

So as technology does more of the thinking, a young person who can still figure things out, own the outcome, pushes through a setback, make themselves understood, and work alongside other people is going to stand apart from one who can't. And the stakes aren't only about work. A teen raised to let a screen handle every problem and broker conversation can grow up fluent with devices and oddly unpracticed with people. The Five are part of what keeps someone connected to their own resourcefulness, and to everyone around them, in a world that's quietly built to do both.

That's a hopeful diagnosis. If the problem were a character flaw in a generation, there'd be nothing to do. But missing reps can be restored. Parents who understand which skills are being underbuilt, and which moments develop them, can recover most of what childhood used to do automatically. Which is what this book is about.

Most parenting books focus on the wrong things

Walk into any parenting section of a bookstore and you'll find shelves devoted to grades, behavior, screen time, sleep, anxiety, college admissions, and how to talk to a teenager. Same on Amazon. All of these are real concerns. None of them is the thing. They're symptoms, outputs. They're what shows up on the dashboard, not what's under the hood.

The question most parenting books miss is what underlying capacities a young person is building during the years they live with you. Grades will rise and fall. Behavior shifts, friend groups churn, interests come and go,

moods swing, report cards do whatever they do. What sticks is the operating system your child takes with them into every situation they'll face for the next 60 years.

One more confusion worth naming early: personality is not destiny. The quiet child may be an excellent communicator. The chatty one may be a poor one. The cautious teen may be deeply resourceful. The bold one may be unable to carry weight. Parents look at temperament and feel reassured or alarmed for the wrong reasons, confusing style with skill. Style is what your child was born with. Skill is what they're trained into. This book is about skill.

The Five, up close

Here's what each of The Five means in the everyday language a parent needs, along with the question parents instinctively ask about each one when they look at their own child.

1. Resourcefulness is figuring things out instead of waiting for rescue. This isn't about being "smart" in the school sense. It's what your young person does when they hit a wall. When the instructions run out, when the plan falls apart, when no adult is going to step in and fix it. How well do they think their way toward a solution? Resourceful kids size up the situation, generate options, and try something. They don't freeze, complain, or hand the problem back.

The parent's instinctive question: When something goes wrong, does my child figure it out or wait for rescue?

2. *Responsibility* is owning the outcome and carrying the weight that comes with it. It isn't just doing what you're supposed to do. It's becoming the kind of person who notices when something needs handling, takes it on, and carries the weight of how it turns out. Responsible kids don't just complete tasks. They carry weight. They feel the pull of the right thing even when nobody's watching. Blaming others, whining about results, making excuses, playing the victim. None of that builds a life of victories. It quietly lowers what a young person believes they can do.

The parent's instinctive question: Does my child carry weight or push it onto others?

3. *Resilience* is bouncing back, pushing through, and coming back stronger. It isn't toughness in the macho sense, and it isn't grit gone grim. It's the everyday capacity to absorb a setback, hold steady under pressure, believe that effort still matters, and try again. The opposite of fragility isn't strength. Resilience is the ability to get stronger through difficulty rather than just survive it. Life trips us up. Occasionally it beats us down. How a young person responds determines their trajectory. Do they get stronger and push back, or do they let the defeat deflate something inside them?

The parent's instinctive question: When things go sideways, does my child keep going or melt down?

4. *Communication* is speaking up, listening well, and finding the meeting point in between. It isn't about being talkative or quiet. It's the skill of

getting an idea across so others hear it, taking in what others are saying, and navigating the back-and-forth that lets two people understand each other even when they disagree. Quiet teens can be excellent communicators. Chatty ones can be poor ones. The trait that matters isn't how much your child talks. It's whether their words land. Having taught for decades, I can tell you that some of the deepest thinkers in the room rarely speak, and some of the loudest students haven't engaged their brains in 20 minutes. But a youth who can't articulate their thoughts won't get heard, and what they have to offer won't be valued.

The parent's instinctive question: Can my child be understood, and can my child understand others?

5. *Collaboration* is making things happen with and through other people. It may start with kindergarten-style teamwork (being nice, taking turns, sharing the crayons), but it quickly outgrows that. We're talking about the harder, grown-up skill of getting something done with people who have their own ideas, pace, and moods. Real collaborators contribute, coordinate, and carry their share without dominating and without disappearing. They know how to manage conflict instead of running from it or throwing fuel on it. They make the group better than the sum of its parts. The world keeps getting more complex, and almost everything worth doing in it now requires people working with other people. These skills can make or break a family. They'll make or break a career.

The parent's instinctive question: Does my child make the group better or harder?

If you read those five and started silently scoring your own child as you went, you're doing exactly what the book is for. That scoring instinct is the parent's first new muscle. Most parents have never had a vocabulary for what they're looking at. Now you do.

These are the load-bearing skills. Not the only skills that matter, but the foundational ones. Other capacities (creativity, kindness, courage, faith, work ethic) sit on top of these and depend on them. Without the foundational five, the rest don't hold up. With them, almost anything your child wants to build in life has a structure to rest on.

Why these five, and not seven or ten

Parents have a reasonable right to ask why the number is what it is. The honest answer is that the number isn't sacred. Other frameworks exist. Covey identified seven habits for adults. Other researchers list 10 or 12 traits for youth development. Each is useful in its own context.

What I can tell you is what shows up over and over in young adults who handle life well, and what shows up missing in those who don't. After decades of watching children develop in homes, classrooms, summer programs, and leadership trainings across several countries, these are the five capacities that keep appearing. Not as a tidy theoretical model. As a stubborn empirical pattern. The young adults who arrive ready have

these. The ones who arrive overwhelmed are missing one or more.
Reliably. Across cultures.

They're also The Five that hold each other up. Resourcefulness without responsibility produces a clever kid who never finishes anything.

Responsibility without resilience produces a teen who buckles the first time the weight feels heavy. Resilience without communication

produces a young person who suffers in silence. Communication without collaboration produces someone who can talk circles around anyone but can't work with anyone. Collaboration sits on top of the other four. You can't collaborate without them, which is why we save it for last. Pull one, and the structure wobbles. Build all five, and almost anything else your child wants to do in life has somewhere to stand.

Why you can trust this framework

A short word on where this comes from. Parenting books are easy to write, and most don't survive contact with an actual child. This framework wasn't built in a study. It was designed across two long, parallel vantage points. For more than two decades I've worked in young leader development. Training them, building curricula, watching thousands of children and teens practice leadership and team-member roles in real settings, in multiple cultures. For roughly 25 years before that, I worked as a pastor. That gave me something most parenting writers don't have: a long, repeated, intimate look at how families work behind closed doors. Through marriages, losses, adolescent crises, reconciliations, and ruptures. I sat with parents whose teens were in

trouble. I helped bury children. I watched kids I baptized grow into adults I officiated weddings for and then observed some of them become parents themselves.

Nancy and I raised three sons. I made plenty of mistakes doing it. Stretches of impatience when patience was what they needed. Hours at work that probably should have been time spent at home. Conversations I'd give a lot to have back. There were also fun wrestling matches we lost count of, road trips and vacations, games and plays and practices I tried not to miss, and a wife whose instincts taught me more about raising children than any book ever did.

I tell you this for one reason. The framework in this book isn't a theory I'm hoping holds up. It's a pattern I've watched form, fail to form, and reform in real homes and classrooms, including my own. The deeper professional case (the research, the leadership science, the developmental window) belongs later in the book, where it can do its work without crowding out the only thing that matters at this point: whether The Five skills feel true to what you already see in your child.

If they do, keep reading. Your child can be trained in each of these. Not by accident, but on purpose, in the years that are passing whether you use them or not.

Before we go further

One last thing worth saying out loud. This isn't a book about making your child impressive. It's a playbook about giving your young person a

working set of skills for the life they're going to live, which will include disappointments, setbacks, hard conversations, ambiguous instructions, and people who don't do what they said they'd do. Your child doesn't need to be exceptional. They need to be equipped.

The Five equip them. The years between 5 and 15 are when kids are most pliable, when the skills are most teachable, and when they're most affected by the adults closest to home. You are the adult closest to home. Whatever else is true, of schools, coaches, screens, peers, the wider culture, the parent is still the person with the relational continuity, the daily proximity, and the long-term stake to do this work.

So, before we go any further, know that this is doable. The framework is small enough to remember and big enough to matter. The next chapter starts with the first of The Five, the skill that decides what your child does when nobody's coming to fix it.

Let's begin where every thriving young person begins. By being resourceful.

Notes

1. Giulia M. Dotti Sani and Judith Treas, "Educational Gradients in Parents' Child-Care Time Across Countries, 1965–2012," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78, no. 4 (August 2016): 1083–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12305>

Chapter 3

Resourcefulness

Problem Solving and Survival Instincts

Lost and found

I'm using travel stories as a thread through these first chapters on The Five because every trip Nancy and I have taken has, sooner or later, required all of them from us as adults. The stories aren't proof of anything. They're a reminder that what we're asking our kids to develop is what we're still drawing on in our 60s.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned Positano, Italy, so here's another brief story from that trip. Nancy and I decided to take a ferry to the island of Capri, which we'd heard a lot about. On the return to Positano, where we were staying, we were scheduled to dock at 7 PM. We sat on a bench at the front of the boat to keep Nancy from getting seasick, which is more likely indoors. As the vessel backed into the dock, we waited for the call to disembark. We watched the crewmember lower the anchor, directly in front of us. A minute or two passed. Then the anchor noisily ascended and we began heading back out to sea.

I figured boat traffic or rough water had pushed the captain to try docking again, but as we kept moving into open water I got concerned. I went inside to find a crewmember and told him we needed to get off at Positano. He shrugged, no English, and found a colleague who spoke some.

"We needed to get off at Positano," I said.

"We just let people off. You needed to be at the back of the boat. We're going to Amalfi now."

"But we never heard any announcement," I said. "How were we to know?"

"Sorry. We walk around inside and announce it."

"So, what can we do?"

"Our next stop is Amalfi. You can get off there and take a bus back to Positano, or stay on the boat and we'll return in an hour or so, but I'd have to charge you for the additional ride."

"How long is the bus ride?"

"About 30 minutes."

We got off at Amalfi. Nancy asked the agent which bus to take, and we headed for it to buy our ticket from the driver. We squeezed into the aisle. Every seat was already taken. The sights, sounds, and smells gave us more of a local feel than we'd bargained for. After half a dozen stops, about halfway to our destination, traffic came

to a halt. The narrow two-way, cliff-hugging roads above the water can back up fast on a single fender-bender. We sat there, or rather stood there, for half an hour. Finally, a police car with blue lights flashing led us through a maze of streets and back to the main road. We asked a local woman which stop was Positano. She told us the next one was the last.

As we got off, I locked our hotel into my phone's GPS. That helped until we balked at the recommended route along dark sidewalks. Through a maze of stairs, turns, and a couple of questions to passersby, we found our way to the hotel, a full three hours after the ferry had initially stopped in Positano.

What's the point of the story? Few of us enjoy hearing about someone else's vacation, granted. But this three-hour challenge, told in one minute, represents most of the problems we face in life. A goal, limited resources, and the work of figuring out how to get from where you are to where you need to be. This vacation mini-dilemma shares its DNA with resourcefulness in family life, community living, and the working world. These are the skills we as parents need to be building in our children, between the ages of 5 and 15, if we want to set them up to thrive.

Stories like that aren't unusual. Every adult has versions of them, either as the person in the predicament or the person watching it happen. What's easy to miss is that the moment didn't arrive out of nowhere. Resourcefulness, or the lack of it, almost always traces back to something earlier. To a child who was given the chance to

figure something out, or a child who wasn't. The adult version is the same skill scaled up, with bigger walls and higher stakes, but the instinct underneath hasn't changed.

That instinct is the first of The Five, and there's a reason it comes first. Without it, the other four have nothing to operate on. A young person who waits to be told what to do can't take responsibility for something they didn't initiate, can't be resilient about a problem they never engaged with, can't communicate about a situation they didn't process, and can't collaborate on a solution they didn't help shape. Resourcefulness is the front door. Everything else walks through it.

What resourcefulness looks like

Most parents have a fuzzy sense of what they mean by resourcefulness. They picture a kid who is “good at figuring things out,” which is true as far as it goes, but it bundles together several distinct capacities that grow on different timelines and need different kinds of practice. To train the skill well, it helps to see what's inside it. Four things, working together.

Initiation. A resourceful child starts. They don't wait for an adult to assign the next step, for the situation to clarify itself, or for someone else to make the first move. The blank page doesn't freeze them. They begin, usually imperfectly, which is half the skill and the half most kids never see modeled, because adults move so quickly to fill every silence and resolve every uncertainty for them.

Innovation. Once they're moving, a resourceful preteen can think differently about the situation in front of them. Not creatively in the artsy sense. Practically. They notice the chair could be a stepstool, the friend could be an ally, the rule could be bent or worked around, the problem could be approached from a side nobody else has tried. Innovation in a young person looks less like inventing something new and more like seeing what's already there in a way other people missed.

Critical thinking. Resourceful youth learn to distinguish root from fruit. The fruit is what shows up on the surface: the broken thing, the angry friend, the missed deadline, the failing grade. The root is what's underneath: the loose screw, the misread comment, the cluttered schedule, the missed concept three weeks earlier. A teen who only addresses the fruit spends their life running between symptoms. When a young person learns to look for the root instead, the same problem doesn't come back six months later wearing a different shirt. This is second-level thinking, and almost nobody teaches it directly. It develops when a child is asked the right kind of question often enough that they start asking it of themselves.

Strategic thinking. The fourth facet is the ability to hold the big picture and the small picture at the same time. To see where they're trying to end up and break the path into steps that get them there. This is the work of both halves of the brain at once: the right side imagining the destination, the left side sequencing

the moves. Kids who develop this early can plan a week, design a project, manage a goal. Those who don't spend their lives reacting to whatever's in front of them, which is exhausting and rarely takes them anywhere they chose.

Initiation, innovation, critical thinking, strategic thinking. A young person with all four is what we mean by resourceful. One with none is stuck. Most land somewhere in the middle, stronger in one or two and weaker in others. The job is to know which is which and focus deliberately on the weaker ones.

Every now and then I'll share a story about our three sons. Fair warning. These are bragging opportunities. Our oldest, Jeff, received top honors in college and then a full-ride scholarship to Duke Divinity School, where he and his wife attended. He has now worked for Duke University for over a decade. Because he and Angela hold our two granddaughters hostage in Durham, North Carolina, and not Thousand Oaks, California, we visit them a couple of times a year.

On one visit, in their mid-century farm-style home complete with chickens and a rabbit, we got to watch Jeff teach resourcefulness in real time. Juniper, age 3 or 4 was climbing on an indoor wooden apparatus, the kind with horizontal rungs about three to four feet high. When she reached the top, she got nervous, unsure how to get down. She called for her dad and reached out her arms for help. Jeff walked over to her, but instead of lifting her down, he

calmly said, "Okay, Juniper, why don't you come up with two or three strategies for how to get down."

I confess she might be thinking, "Well, one of them is that you could lift me down." But Juniper stopped whining and said, "I could turn around and go down backwards, like I came up."

Jeff said, "Good. What else?"

She thought a moment. "I could climb over the top and go down on the other side."

"Okay," Jeff said. "Which one do you plan to do?"

Without a verbal response, Juniper put her right leg on the rung below the other and cautiously climbed down. Unscathed, and without help from Dad. Or was it without help? Jeff was helping her, but by coaching instead of rescuing. The difference is the whole chapter.

That's one small example among many. Jeff and Angela have invested in Juniper and Ivy in scores of ways, empowering them to run their own craft and lemonade stands, plan their own parties, and brainstorm mini-business projects. None of those activities matter on their own. What matters is what's being built underneath. We'll get to how to instill these kinds of habits later in the book.

Why this skill matters more than most parents realize

The case for resourcefulness isn't one researchers had to invent.

It's been showing up in various bodies of evidence, all pointing the same direction. One example is the employer data. The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* surveyed more than 1,000 employers representing 14 million workers across 55 economies. Analytical thinking ranked as the single most important core skill for the workforce, with 7 of every 10 companies calling it essential. Creative thinking and resilience followed close behind, and the report concluded that “problem-solving abilities and personal resilience are critical for success.”¹ The skills employers say they can't find enough of are, almost exactly, the four facets of resourcefulness.

A second is the developmental research on what happens when kids don't get to practice. A 2024 meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Adult Development* synthesized 53 studies and 111 effect sizes on what researchers call “helicopter parenting,” the well-intentioned over-involvement that quietly removes a young person's opportunities to figure things out. The finding was consistent across studies: more helicoptering produced lower self-efficacy, weaker self-regulation, and reduced academic adjustment in emerging adults.² The kids weren't damaged, just under-trained. The reps were taken from them by parents who meant well.

A third area is the long arc. A body of research grounded in self-determination theory has tracked what happens to children whose autonomy is supported versus restricted across childhood and

adolescence. The pattern is durable. Youth who get to make age-appropriate decisions, recover from age-appropriate failures, and solve age-appropriate problems show higher competence, lower anxiety, and better psychological adjustment well into adulthood.³ The mechanism isn't mysterious. Skills you don't practice, you don't have.

These research streams depicting different methods, decades of data, converge on the same conclusion. Children who get to be resourceful become adults who can handle life. The ones who don't, don't. The research doesn't prescribe a parenting style. It describes a pattern parents can either work with or work against.

How to tell where your child stands

By the time you finish this book, you'll have a working assessment tool. For now, four questions are enough to start noticing where your young person sits on each facet.

On initiation: When your child encounters something unfamiliar, do they try anything, or do they wait? Watch what happens in the first 30 seconds after they hit a snag. That window tells you most of what you need to know.

On innovation: When the obvious approach doesn't work, does your preteen look for a different one, or conclude it can't be done? Kids who give up at the first failed attempt are missing the muscle that says *try it another way*.

On critical thinking: When something goes wrong, does your teen ask why, or just want it fixed? A youth satisfied with patches will spend a lifetime patching. One who wonders about the root is already thinking the way successful adults think.

On strategic thinking: When your adolescent wants something that requires more than one step, can they break it down, or do they get stuck at “I want it”? A young person who can sketch even a rough sequence of steps toward a goal is exercising a skill most adults still struggle with.

You won't get clean answers right away, and you don't need them. The point of these questions isn't to score your child. It's to start seeing what was invisible before. Once a parent has a vocabulary for the four facets, the situations that build them start showing up everywhere, and so do the moments where a parent has been quietly taking the reps away.

Before we go further

Of all of The Five, resourcefulness is the one parents are most likely to interfere with by accident. Kindness gets in the way. Efficiency gets in the way. Love gets in the way. We see our child struggling and we step in, because that's what love does in the short term. The work of this chapter and this book, is to recognize that the short-term help and the long-term skill often pull in opposite directions, and to learn to choose the long-term skill more often than feels comfortable. A young person who is rescued every time

learns that someone else will handle it. One who is allowed to figure it out learns something far more useful: that they can.

One more thing before we move on. The Five aren't just five good ideas pulled from a long list of parenting virtues. They were chosen because they share a single common training ground, a particular kind of experience that exercises all of them at once, in real situations with real consequences. We'll get to that in Part II. For now, what matters is that resourcefulness is the foundation, and the foundation has to be built first.

That's the first skill. The next one is what builds on top of it: the willingness to carry the weight of what you've started. Resourceful is how you begin. Responsible is how you finish.

Notes

1. World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2025* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, January 2025), 36–40. The report surveyed more than 1,000 employers representing over 14 million workers across 22 industry clusters and 55 economies.
2. Larry J. Nelson, Laura M. Padilla-Walker, et al., “Parenting in Overdrive: A Meta-analysis of Helicopter Parenting Across Multiple Indices of Emerging Adult Functioning,” *Journal of Adult Development* (2024). Meta-analysis of 53 studies and 111 effect sizes.
3. Holly H. Schiffrin et al., “Helicopter Parenting, Autonomy Support, and College Students' Mental Health and Well-being: The Moderating Role of Sex and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 28 (2019): 3346–3359. See also Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and*

Wellness (New York: Guilford Press, 2017), for the underlying theoretical framework on autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Chapter 4

Responsibility

Lifting the Load in Life

Some wine to go with my whine

During our France, Italy, Greece vacation, we had just flown from Naples to Athens. We needed a taxi from the airport to a hotel beside the harbor, where we'd catch an early morning ferry to Paros, a Greek island in the Aegean. I'd done my homework and knew the going rate from the airport was about 55 to 60 euros. Not a problem. We exited the terminal with our carry-on luggage (we learned to travel light after losing bags on a previous vacation) and walked toward a driver who jumped out and opened his trunk.

He tossed our bags in, asked for the destination, and sped down the road. I turned on my GPS in the dark backseat to make sure we were heading the right way. Nancy and I noticed how fast he was driving, tailgating cars in the fast lane. According to my phone, he was doing over 110 km/h (70 mph) in an 80 km/h (50 mph) zone. A couple of times he made small talk, then interrupted himself with short, abrupt phone calls. When we pulled up to the hotel he turned around and said, "That's 83 euros."

We had also noticed he'd turned off the meter about halfway through the trip. I said, "Eighty-three? It should be more like 60." He repeated the number. I handed him my credit card. "No credit cards. Euros only." Between us we had 75. I told him so. "It's 83," he repeated. We found a 10-dollar US bill and handed that over. He took it without comment. I asked for a receipt, hoping to contact his company later. He scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it back. We gathered our luggage and went inside.

At the front desk, I asked the clerk what a taxi from the airport should cost. "Fifty to 60 euros," she said. "That guy charged us 83," I said. "I'm so sorry," she replied, frowning. "He wasn't being fair with you." I looked at the receipt. No company name, no driver ID. No way to complain. The clerk apologized again and said, "Let me send some wine to your room, our way of saying we're sorry for your experience." I thanked her but declined. The rest of our stay in Greece was filled with gracious people, and I don't share this to characterize a country by one bad actor. I share it for the contrast. The driver and the desk clerk had the same situation in front of them. He chose to take advantage of it. She, who had nothing to do with what happened, chose to carry some of it anyway. She wasn't taking responsibility for his behavior. She was taking responsibility for our experience. The difference between those two responses is the subject of this chapter.

That's the second skill on our list, and it sits right behind resourcefulness for a reason. Resourcefulness gets you started.

Responsibility gets you to the finish. A young person who can figure things out but won't carry the weight of what they've figured out is doing half the job. One who is willing to carry weight but can't figure anything out is doing the other half. Thriving requires both.

What responsibility is and what it isn't

Before we go any further, an important distinction. Some readers will have a complicated relationship with the word responsibility, because they grew up being unfairly blamed for things that weren't theirs. A parent's anger that got pinned on a child. A sibling's behavior that became the older child's problem. An abuse that the victim was somehow made to feel responsible for. If that's any part of your story, the word may carry weight it shouldn't. So let me draw a line that the rest of the chapter rests on.

Responsibility is not the same as fault. Fault is backward-looking. It asks who caused something, and the honest answer is often that the cause was someone else, or something else, or a combination of forces nobody chose. Children who are abused did not cause it. Preteens who are bullied did not invite it. Teens whose parents divorced did not break the marriage. Fault, in those cases, lies elsewhere, and trying to assign it to the young person is one of the most damaging things adults do.

Responsibility, in this context, is forward-looking. It doesn't ask who caused what just happened. It asks who is going to act on

what comes next. And the answer is always available, no matter what came before. A child who was hurt by something outside their control still has choices about how they respond. So does an adult. Responsibility is the trained instinct to say, “I can do something about what's in front of me,” and then to do it. The opposite isn't innocence. The opposite is helplessness.

Psychologists have a word for this. They call it *self-efficacy*, a fancy name for the belief that you can do things and change them. Not that you control the world or that you're responsible for what other people do. Just the working confidence that when something needs to happen, you can probably make a useful contribution to making it happen. Albert Bandura, the psychologist who built the field around this concept, spent five decades documenting how much of human flourishing rests on it.¹ Young people who develop self-efficacy early tend to make better decisions, recover from setbacks more quickly, and choose harder, more rewarding paths in adulthood. Those who don't drift toward the path of least resistance, which is usually the path someone else laid down for them.

There's a related concept worth naming. Psychologists describe two basic orientations. An *internal* locus of control, the belief that your own actions meaningfully shape what happens to you, and an *external* locus of control, the belief that outcomes are mostly determined by forces outside you. Some things really are outside our control. But the person whose default setting is external

spends a lifetime waiting for the right circumstances to act, and the circumstances rarely arrive. Having worked with a number of Navy SEALs, I've seen what this skill looks like at the elite end. In their book *Extreme Ownership*, former SEALs Jocko Willink and Leif Babin argue that great leaders take ownership of a team's failures even when they didn't personally cause them, because that's where the leverage to fix things lives. The point isn't to assign yourself fault that isn't yours. It's to keep yourself in the seat where action is still possible.

That's the foundation under this chapter. Responsibility is self-efficacy in motion. The trained habit of treating what's in front of you as something you can act on, rather than something happening to you. Here are four facets that make up the skill, and the patterns that quietly suppress it in childhood.

Four facets

Like resourcefulness, responsibility bundles together several abilities that develop on different timelines and need various practices.

Ownership. There's a difference between owning something and renting it. A renter typically only pays attention as far as the lease requires. An owner sees a leaking faucet and fixes it, because the consequence will fall on them either way. The same logic applies to a project, a chore, a friendship, a classroom group, a sports team. Youth who own their roles show up differently. They notice things

renters miss. They act on things renters wait out. Ownership doesn't require the title. It requires the stake.

Follow-through. The willingness to finish what you started, especially through the middle, which is where most things stall. Beginning is exciting. Finishing is satisfying. The middle is where everyone wants to quit, and the preteen who pushes through it has a skill most adults are still trying to develop. Follow-through is not stubbornness. It's the discipline of completing the loop you opened: the homework, the promise, the chore, the friend you said you'd call. A young person who consistently leaves loops open trains the world to stop trusting them. One who closes them becomes someone people count on, which is one of the most valuable identities a teen can build.

Reliability. Your word and your action line up. When you say you'll do something, you do it. When you can't, you say so before the deadline rather than after. Reliable kids understand that their word is currency and that spending it carelessly devalues it for everyone, including themselves. The opposite is the child who promises easily and delivers inconsistently. Reliability is the slow-built reputation that opens doors no other skill can.

Accountability. Answering honestly for results, both good and bad. The accountable adolescent can say, "I did that," when it went well, and "I did that," when it didn't, without spinning either one. They don't need to lie about mistakes, because mistakes don't threaten their sense of self. The cover-up reflex, the small lie that

grows into a habit, is one of the most expensive habits a young person can form, and most adults carry some version of it into their working lives because nobody helped them shed it early.

Ownership, follow-through, reliability, accountability. Ownership is the disposition. Follow-through is the action. Reliability is the pattern others come to expect. Accountability is what happens at the end, when results have to be named. A young person who develops all four becomes someone who can be trusted with weight, and weight is what life will eventually bring.

What it looks like when this skill is missing

Responsibility is easier to spot in its absence than its presence. Most parents recognize these patterns. Few of us have names for them.

Blame-shifting. The instant deflection. The teacher was unfair. The other kid started it. The instructions weren't clear. Sometimes those statements are even true. The problem isn't the truth value. The problem is what comes next, which is usually nothing, because the deflection itself has done the work the child wanted it to do.

The victim posture. Less aggressive than blame-shifting, but more corrosive. The young person positions themselves as the one things happen to, and then waits. They're not lying. They genuinely feel powerless. The trouble is that the posture, repeated, becomes the personality, and an identity built on powerlessness is hard to step out of later.

The cover-up. The small lie meant to escape the small consequence. Almost every child does this at some point. The ones who keep doing it past childhood usually learned that the lie worked. The ones who grow out of it usually had parents who calmly insisted on the truth and accepted it when it came.

Learned helplessness. The quiet, gradual handover of one's own life to the people around them. The teen who lets a parent solve every conflict, plan every step, and answer every difficult question is being trained, slowly, to believe they can't. This is the pattern parents are most likely to create by accident, because each individual instance of help looks like love.

Naming these patterns matters because once you can see them, you can interrupt them. A child who blames doesn't need a lecture; they need a quiet, repeated invitation to look at what they could do next. An adolescent in a victim posture doesn't need their feelings dismissed; they need someone to gently ask, "What's one thing in your power here?" We'll work through those responses in Part III. For now, recognition is enough.

Here's what the skill being built looks like in a kid. Our youngest son, Jesse, was a strong athlete growing up, the Shohei Ohtani of his high school baseball league, meaning he could both pitch and hit well. Jesse also had a big heart for the kid getting overlooked. One day during practice, he noticed that one of his teammates, a player who showed up reliably but didn't have much skill, almost never got to play. The school was small enough that anyone who

wanted to join the team could, but the coach used the best players in games and most of the time during practice as well. Feeling for his benched teammate, Jesse refused to take the field one day during practice so that the other player could. Words were exchanged with the coach, and Jesse was suspended for the next game.

Nancy and I never advocated talking back to authority figures, and we said as much. But we also told him we were proud of him for standing up for a teammate he felt was being overlooked. That kind of fairness-driven ownership, taking on weight that wasn't technically his to carry, was responsibility doing what it's supposed to do. It came from years of small moments at home where the question wasn't "Who is to blame?" but "What will you do about it?" That's the question this chapter is trying to plant.

Why this skill matters more than most parents realize

Three lines of evidence converge on the same conclusion.

The first is the self-efficacy research, which is now decades deep. A comprehensive review of self-efficacy as a positive youth development construct found that children who develop strong self-efficacy beliefs show better academic performance, healthier life choices, stronger recovery from setbacks, and better psychological adjustment well into adulthood.² The mechanism isn't mysterious. Young people who believe they can act on the world act on it. Acting on it produces results. Results strengthen

the belief. The belief produces more action. The cycle compounds in either direction.

The second is the research on conscientiousness, the personality trait most closely associated with follow-through and reliability. Of the Big Five personality dimensions psychologists have identified, conscientiousness is consistently among the strongest predictors of life outcomes, predicting outcomes such as occupational success, relationship stability, and health as powerfully as intelligence or socioeconomic status do. Conscientious children grow into adults who earn more, stay married longer, live healthier, and report higher life satisfaction.³ The trait isn't fixed at birth. It develops through repeated experiences of being asked to follow through, being held to one's word, and being trusted with consequences proportionate to age.

The third is the inverse. The 2024 meta-analysis on over-involved parenting that I cited in Chapter 3 found reduced self-regulation and weaker accountability behaviors in emerging adults whose parents had consistently stepped in to manage outcomes for them.⁴ The kids weren't damaged. They were under-practiced. The everyday situations that would have built the skill were taken from them by adults trying to help.

Young people who get to own outcomes become adults who can be trusted with them. The work of this chapter is to make sure your child gets the practice.

How to tell where your child stands

Four questions to start noticing where your child sits on each facet.

On ownership: When your child is part of something, do they treat it as theirs to shape, or as something happening around them?

Listen for the difference between “we” and “they” in how they describe the group they belong to.

On follow-through: When your preteen starts something, do they finish it, or do open loops pile up around them? Watch the middle of any project they take on. The middle is the diagnostic.

On reliability: When your teen says they'll do something, do they do it? Notice the gap between the promise and the action, and whether that gap is closing or widening with age.

On accountability: When something goes wrong, can your adolescent say “I did that” without spinning it? A young person who can name a mistake plainly is already most of the way past it. One who can't is going to spend years working around the cover-up reflex.

As with resourcefulness, the point isn't to grade your child. It's to start seeing the patterns. Once you have a vocabulary for the four facets, the situations that build them become visible, and so do the moments when you've been quietly absorbing weight your child should have been carrying.

Before we go further

Of all of The Five, responsibility is the one most often confused with something it isn't. It isn't guilt. It isn't blame absorbed by the wrong person. It isn't a heavy load placed on a young person too young to carry it. It's the trained instinct, built over years, to look at what's in front of you and ask, "What can I do about this?" Then to do it. It's the difference between renting your life and owning it. Your child will get the chance to build this skill in dozens of small moments every week. A spilled drink. A forgotten promise. A botched chore. A mistake at school. The skill grows in the response to those moments, not in their absence. The parent's job is to make sure the response happens, not by lecturing, but by quietly refusing to take the weight back once it's been handed over.

One more thing before we move on. The four facets of responsibility, like the four facets of resourcefulness, share a common training ground. There is a particular kind of experience that exercises all four at once, in situations real enough that the consequences are real too. We'll get to that in Part II.

That's the second skill. The next one is what makes the first two survive contact with disappointment. Resourceful is how you begin. Responsible is how you finish. Resilient is what gets you through the part where everything goes wrong.

Notes

1. Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1997). For a more recent synthesis of self-efficacy in youth development, see Sandra K. M. Tsang, Eadaoin K. P. Hui, and Bella C. M. Law, "Self-Efficacy as a Positive Youth Development Construct: A Conceptual Review," *The Scientific World Journal* (2012), article ID 452327. On internal vs. external locus of control, see Julian B. Rotter, "Generalized Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied* 80, no. 1 (1966): 1–28. The popular treatment cited is Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).
2. Tsang, Hui, and Law, "Self-Efficacy as a Positive Youth Development Construct," cited above. See also Frank Pajares, "Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Academic Settings," *Review of Educational Research* 66, no. 4 (1996): 543–578, for foundational work on self-efficacy and academic outcomes.
3. Brent W. Roberts et al., "The Power of Personality: The Comparative Validity of Personality Traits, Socioeconomic Status, and Cognitive Ability for Predicting Important Life Outcomes," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2, no. 4 (2007): 313–345.
4. Larry J. Nelson, Laura M. Padilla-Walker, et al., "Parenting in Overdrive: A Meta-analysis of Helicopter Parenting Across Multiple Indices of Emerging Adult Functioning," *Journal of Adult Development* (2024).

Chapter 5

Resilience

Grit to Persevere

Pandemic without panic

Let me begin with another travel-related illustration, to show how this skill looks in adult form. This one, however, is unrelated to the recent France-Italy-Greece trip. The Covid pandemic disrupted life across nearly the entire globe. We naturally cancelled our travels in 2021, as we traversed the worst of the disease. I say “we” lightly because I pretty much continued to teach remotely, whereas my wife oversaw a senior living community of 100-plus adults and 100-plus staff. Nancy led valiantly, saving lives through excruciating circumstances. But to keep with the theme of foreign travel, I'll fast forward to 2022.

Lockdown was over and traveling with conditions was allowed. We decided to resurrect our 2021 plans to visit Ireland, followed by the Scandinavian countries, plus Finland and the Netherlands. Somewhere between Dublin and Copenhagen, the airline lost my

luggage. Thousands of bags cluttered airports throughout the world. Thanks to a credit card and H&M stores, we replaced the basics. But then we joined a land tour, taking a bus through four countries. Unfortunately, in the Copenhagen airport, we stood around quite a few coughing travelers. Sure enough, by Day 3 of our 10-day tour, I tested positive for Covid in Oslo, Norway. We had to leave the group and figure out what we would do: return home, quarantine in Norway, or reschedule our trip on our own. Because Covid restrictions had lightened in Europe at the time, we decided on the latter. I wore a mask in public settings but we changed gears. Although we missed Finland, we still got to experience Sweden and the Netherlands, changing transportation modes, hotels, and continuing to replace my lost luggage items. Long story short, I got my luggage back three weeks after returning home, eventually got our tour money reimbursed for the time we lost, and consider it a wonderful vacation despite the circumstances.

This minor plight is primarily an example of resilience, not giving up. It involves the same DNA of other situations where grit and determination are required to persevere toward a goal. Instilling this skill into our children while they're malleable is vital to their well-being.

What resilience is and isn't

Before we go further, a distinction worth getting right. Resilience is not toughness, at least not in the way that word usually gets used.

It's not the suppression of feeling. It's not the cheerful denial that something bad has happened. It's not the demand that a child smile through pain and pretend not to be hurt by what hurt them. Cultures that confuse resilience with stoicism end up producing adults who are good at not feeling things and bad at recovering from them, which turns out to be the opposite of resilience.

Resilience is the trained capacity to absorb a setback, hold steady long enough to feel what's real, and then keep moving. The feeling matters. The moving matters. Either one without the other is something else.

It's also worth saying out loud. Some setbacks are big enough that the right response is to stop, grieve, and ask for help. A young person who experiences the death of a parent, a serious illness, an abuse, or a profound loss is not lacking resilience if they need time, professional support, or both. Calling that weakness is one of the more damaging things adults do. Real resilience includes the wisdom to know when something is too big to carry alone, and the willingness to let other people help carry it. That, too, is a skill, and it's built the way the others are: by adults who model it, name it, and refuse to pretend otherwise.

With that in place, the rest of the chapter is about the trained capacity, the four facets that make it up, and the everyday ways parents either build it or accidentally suppress it.

Four facets

Like resourcefulness and responsibility, resilience bundles together several distinct capacities that develop on different timelines.

Recovery. The basic bounce. The capacity to absorb a setback and get back up, sooner rather than later. Recovery isn't about how hard you got hit. It's about how long you stay down before you start moving again. Kids who develop this learn that being knocked down is normal, recoverable, and survivable. Those who don't tend to treat the first hard moment of any project as evidence that the project is over. A close friend of mine had a big midlife tumble, wrecking his marriage and career. Yet he survived and now helps others “bounce back better.”

Perseverance. Recovery handles the moment. Perseverance handles the long middle. It's the willingness to keep going when the effort hasn't paid off yet, when the original excitement has worn off, when the work has become tedious and the destination is still out of view. Most worthwhile things require this. Most preteens and teens never get to practice it, because most of what we ask them to do is sized in days or weeks rather than months or years.

Reframing. The mindset move that makes the other facets sustainable. A young person who can look at a setback and see information rather than a verdict has a tool most adults are still trying to acquire. The failed math test isn't proof of stupidity. It's data about what to study next. The friendship that ended isn't

proof of being unlovable. It's information about a fit that didn't work. Reframing isn't denial. It's the skill of choosing the story that's both true and useful, instead of the story that's true and useless. Comedian Michael Jr. notes how every joke has a set up before the punchline. He compares it to life, noting a setback can be a setup to deliver your punchline, your purpose for living.

Adaptability. Resilience that learns. When the original plan breaks, what does the youth do next? An adaptable teen changes course without abandoning the destination. A rigid one either marches into the wall again or quits the whole enterprise. Adaptability turns setbacks into pivots instead of dead ends. It's also what keeps a person moving through a long life where conditions change faster than anyone predicted. Nimble organizations can pivot when the environment changes. Inflexible ones cannot and go out of business.

Recovery, perseverance, reframing, adaptability. A child with all four can take a real hit and keep going. One with none gets knocked off course by ordinary turbulence.

What it looks like when this skill is missing

Like responsibility, resilience is easier to see in its absence than its presence.

Catastrophizing. The instant leap from “this went badly” to “my life is ruined.” One bad grade becomes proof of inevitable failure. One social rejection becomes evidence of being permanently

unlikeable. The setback is real. The catastrophe is constructed. The trouble is that the constructed story feels just as true as the real one, and the young person who lives inside it stops trying because trying feels pointless.

Avoidance. Life slowly narrows to only the activities where success feels guaranteed. Tasks the child might fail at get dropped from the list. New things stop getting tried. The teen looks calm, even content, but the world they're willing to engage with is shrinking. Avoidance is the cheapest short-term coping strategy and one of the most expensive long-term ones.

Quitting at the first setback. A particular form of avoidance worth naming separately. The piano lessons stop the week after the first difficult piece. The team gets abandoned after one bad game. The hard conversation gets dropped at the first awkward pause. Quitting becomes a trained response, and a young person who has trained it deeply will keep training it into adulthood, where it shows up as job-hopping, relationship-hopping, and a quiet sense of never having finished anything.

Emotional shutdown. The opposite of resilience that often gets mistaken for it. A youth who appears unaffected by setbacks may have stopped letting themselves feel them. This looks like strength and isn't. The unfelt feeling doesn't go away. It goes underground, where it does more damage than it would have on the surface. The resilient child feels the hurt and keeps moving. The shut-down

child denies the hurt and stops being able to move on anything that matters.

Each of these patterns has a parental response that disarms it, and Part III will get into them. For now, naming them is the first move. A teen who avoids new challenges doesn't need a lecture about effort. They need help with the catastrophic story underneath the avoidance. A child who quits doesn't need shame. They need to be walked back through what just happened and shown what they have to work with.

Here's what the skill being built looks like in a kid. *An example of resilience in our family is our middle son, Josh. If you do a search for "scrappy," chances are he'll be in the results. By the age of 12, he would ride his bicycle around our neighborhood in Scottsdale, Arizona, collecting info sheets posted at homes for sale. He'd come back home and calculate the asking price against recent sales. He'd say, "Dad, they're asking way too much for their house. The market won't bear it." Nancy and I would look at each other and wonder, whose kid is this? Josh worked a variety of jobs through high school, including his own lawn mowing and snow shoveling business. Although Josh attended his freshman year with his brother, he did not enjoy the small, private college. He applied and transferred to an out-of-state school. Although he lived an hour from Denver, he got an internship there. To save time, he sometimes slept in his car in the parking garage, and even in the boardroom under the table.*

Josh graduated with honors and landed a great job at Liberty Media, where he got to ride on the corporate jet and see how they made deals happen. To save his own money, he rented a room in a not-so-safe part of town. Then he earned two graduate degrees from the University of Southern California, paying for them himself. He's now been with a multi-family development firm for over a decade, putting together nine- and 10-figure deals in a competitive real estate finance market. One occasion stands out to illustrate his drive. Just before he graduated from college, we happened to cross paths at the San Francisco airport. He was headed for a job interview at JP Morgan, and we were traveling to speak somewhere. We saw him walking down the hallway toward us in his suit, leather briefcase in hand. I said, "Josh, can you imagine doing this when you were that 12-year-old in Scottsdale?" Without pause he said, "Dad, I've always imagined this." That he had.

Why this skill matters more than most parents realize

Three lines of research illustrate this reality.

The first is the work on growth mindset. In one of the largest growth-mindset experiments ever conducted, published in *Nature*, David Yeager, Carol Dweck, and colleagues studied more than 12,000 ninth-graders across 65 schools. A short online intervention teaching students that their abilities could grow with effort improved grades for lower-achieving students and increased the likelihood of taking advanced courses, particularly in schools where peer norms supported challenge-seeking.¹ The effect wasn't magic,

and it wasn't universal. Mindset research has had its critics, and the field has spent the last several years pre-registering studies and tightening its claims. What survives that scrutiny is straightforward. Young people who believe their abilities can grow handle setbacks differently than those who believe their abilities are fixed. They try longer, recover faster, and choose harder paths. The belief is teachable, and the teaching shows up in measurable outcomes.

The second is Angela Duckworth's research on grit, which she defines as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Across multiple studies of cadets at West Point, finalists at the National Spelling Bee, and students in Chicago public schools, grit predicted who finished what they started, often better than measures of talent or IQ.² The research has had real critiques, particularly about how much grit adds beyond conscientiousness and whether short interventions can build it. The honest summary is that the perseverance half of grit is well-supported, the passion half is harder to measure, and the underlying claim that the capacity to keep going matters more than most adults give it credit for has held up.

The third is the protective-factors research, in some ways the most important. Decades of work on children growing up under genuine adversity, including poverty, instability, trauma, and exposure to violence, beginning with Emmy Werner's landmark Kauai study, which followed a birth cohort for more than three decades, has identified one factor that shows up over and over as the single

strongest predictor of resilient outcomes. It isn't temperament. It isn't genetics. It isn't programs or interventions or school quality. It's the presence in the young person's life of at least one stable, caring, committed adult.³ More recent research continues to confirm it. A Columbia University study, drawing on a long-running longitudinal cohort, found that youth who had even one such committed adult relationship showed substantially lower rates of depression, anxiety, and perceived stress in young adulthood, regardless of the hardships they had faced in childhood. The adult doesn't have to be a parent. It can be a grandmother, a teacher, a coach, a pastor, an aunt. But the presence of that adult, consistently, over time, is the most reliably protective factor researchers have ever identified for childhood resilience.

That third finding is worth sitting with for a moment, because it changes who the protagonist of this chapter is. The parent isn't just teaching resilience by lecturing about it. The parent is, in their consistent presence, the thing that makes resilience possible. The skill is built in the relationship as much as in the lesson.

How to tell where your child stands

Four questions to start noticing where your child sits on each facet.

On recovery: When something goes wrong, how long does your child stay down? Watch the gap between the setback and the next attempt. A shorter gap is the skill developing.

On perseverance: Does your preteen finish things, especially the ones that stop being fun? The middle of any long project is the diagnostic. Anyone can start. Resilient young people finish.

On reframing: When something bad happens, can your teen see anything in it besides the worst possible interpretation? Listen for whether they can name even one thing they could learn or do differently next time. If the answer is always no, the cognitive muscle is underbuilt.

On adaptability: When the original plan breaks, can your adolescent come up with a new one? Or do they collapse the whole goal because the path to it changed? A young person who can pivot toward the same destination is exercising a skill most adults still find hard.

As with the other skills, the point isn't to grade your child. It's to start noticing what was invisible before. Once you have a vocabulary for the four facets, you'll start seeing the moments that build them, and the moments where you've been quietly sparing your child the very experience they needed.

Before we go further

Of all five skills, resilience is the one parents most often try to give their children by removing the things that would build it. The logic feels obvious. If I shield my child from disappointment, they won't experience disappointment. What happens instead is that they don't experience small disappointments at small ages, and then

they encounter their first real one in college or their first job, with no muscle for it. Resilience is built in the small hits, taken at the small ages, with a parent nearby who refuses to either fix it or dismiss it.

Your young person will get the chance to build this skill every week, in dozens of ordinary ways. A friend who disappoints them. A practice that goes badly. A test they didn't prepare for. A piece they can't play. A team they don't make. None of these are catastrophes. All of them are reps. The parent's job is to be present without being protective, available without being absorbing, and honest about the fact that what just happened is hard, and that hard things are survivable, and that the surviving is part of how a person becomes someone.

One more thing before we move on. The four facets of resilience, like the facets of the two skills before it, share a common training ground. There is a particular kind of experience that exercises all four at once, where the setbacks are real, the consequences are real, and the bouncing back happens in front of other people who notice. We'll get to that in Part II.

That's the third skill. The next one is what makes the first three useful to anyone besides the young person practicing them.

Resourceful is how you begin. Responsible is how you finish.

Resilient is what gets you through the part where everything goes wrong. Communicative is how you bring others along for any of it.

Notes

1. David S. Yeager et al., “A National Experiment Reveals Where a Growth Mindset Improves Achievement,” *Nature* 573 (2019): 364–369. Pre-registered, large-scale national experiment with more than 12,000 participants. See also Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006), for the foundational popular treatment.
2. Angela L. Duckworth et al., “Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087–1101. See also Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016). For a careful critique and the current state of the evidence, see Marcus Credé, Michael C. Tynan, and Peter D. Harms, “Much Ado About Grit: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis of the Grit Literature,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 3 (2017): 492–511.
3. The foundational work on protective factors and resilience is Emmy Werner's Kauai Longitudinal Study; see Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith, *Journeys from Childhood to Midlife: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). For recent peer-reviewed synthesis, see Jennifer Fritz et al., “A Systematic Review of Amenable Resilience Factors That Moderate and/or Mediate the Relationship Between Childhood Adversity and Mental Health in Young People,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 9 (2018): 230. The Columbia study cited is Sara M. VanBronkhorst et al., “Sociocultural Risk and Resilience in the Context of Adverse Childhood Experiences,” *JAMA Psychiatry* (December 2023), drawing on the Boricua Youth Study; senior author Cristiane S. Duarte.

Chapter 6

Communication

Gaining Understanding – Conveying Ideas

Do you have your...

Another travel story fits here, to keep showing how The Five look in adult form. New places and unfamiliar settings are practically engineered for miscommunication. Locations, timing, keeping track of your belongings. All of it requires the kind of back-and-forth that good communication is built on.

Last year in Seoul, I left my phone in the back seat of a taxi. Realized it the moment the cab pulled away. The couple who got in after us figured out how to call Nancy's number, happened to be staying at the same hotel we were, and handed it back the next morning. Pure luck and communication, in that order.

Two days before writing this, on the Greek island of Paros, Nancy and I came back to our hotel after sharing a dessert in a local bakery. I had just gotten into bed when she said, "Oh no, where's

my purse?" We tore the room apart. Nothing. "Are our passports in it?" Yes. We headed back toward the bakery, stopped at the front desk on the way out, and asked if they could call the café. They had it. From there on, we agreed, every time we leave a place we run the checklist out loud to each other. Phone, wallet, purse, whatever you brought. That tiny exchange, done out loud, is communication doing its job.

These are small examples, but they share the DNA of the bigger thing this chapter is about. Communication is a key life skill, and it matters a lot more than how much talking a person does.

Communicating isn't about talking a lot

For 25 years, before I became a leadership professor, I worked as a pastor. The work involves a lot of things people don't picture when they hear the word. Hospital visits. Board meetings. Late-night phone calls from families in crisis. The long quiet work of preparing the same kind of talk 52 times a year and trying to make each one matter. But the heart of the work, the thing you do more of than anything else, is sit with people while they try to say something difficult.

I have sat with a husband across from a wife in a counseling room while one of them tried to explain something the other had been waiting 15 years to hear. I have sat with parents the morning after a child's overdose. I have sat with a son trying to find words for the apology he should have said to his father before the funeral. And in

every one of those rooms, the thing I have watched most often is not the dramatic confession or the rupture. It is the slow, careful, clumsy attempt of one person to make themselves understood by another, and the corresponding work of the listener to receive what is being said rather than what they are afraid is being said.

That work is communication. It is not, as most people assume, primarily about how much you talk. It's about whether what you mean is what they hear, and whether what they say is what you take in. The amount of talking is almost irrelevant. Some of the best communicators I have ever known were quiet people. Some of the worst were the most fluent.

I'm leading with this because there is a misconception about communication I want to dismantle at the start of the chapter, before it has time to do more damage. Many parents read a young person's personality and call it communication skill. They look at a quiet preteen and worry. They look at a chatty one and feel reassured. Both readings are wrong. The chatty teen may be a poor communicator who talks over people, never reads the room, and broadcasts without ever receiving. The quiet one may be excellent: listening carefully, asking the right question at the right moment, saying the thing nobody else thought to say. Personality is style. Communication is skill. Confusing the two is one of the more expensive errors a parent can make in this stretch of childhood.

If resilience is the inner work, communication is what connects that work to everyone else. A child who can't speak up gets overlooked,

regardless of what they have to offer. One who can't listen gets resented, regardless of how much they want to be liked. A young person who can do both becomes the one others want to talk to, work with, and eventually follow.

What communication looks like

The skill has multiple parts, but here are four key ones. Most attempts to coach communication in children focus on one and forget the rest, which is why so much classroom and parental coaching produces kids who are technically fluent and functionally hard to talk to.

Expression. A communicating child can say what they mean, in a form the other person can receive. That means knowing what they mean in the first place, which is harder than adults assume. Young people often need help locating their own thought before they can articulate it. It means choosing words that fit the listener, which is the early form of reading the room. And it means saying the thing rather than orbiting around it. Kids allowed to ramble without coaching often grow into adults who take three minutes to deliver a one-sentence point, which is its own kind of failure to communicate.

Reception. A communicating teen can take in what another person is saying. Not waiting for their turn to speak. Not assembling a counterargument in their head while the other person is still talking. Taking it in. Letting the words land, holding them long

enough to consider what was meant, and responding to that meaning rather than to their own version of it. Reception is what most people mean by *listening*, but the word is too soft for what is being asked. Real reception is mildly effortful, even in adults. It does not develop in young people unless they are practiced at it.

Conversation. After 45 years of marriage, Nancy and I have noticed something about most people: they aren't strong conversationalists. When our oldest son Jeff was young, he loved ping pong. I grew up playing it with my dad, too. Ping pong is a good metaphor for communication done well. You hit it to them, they hit it to you. It's the basis for friendships, international negotiations, conflict resolution, and any meeting that gets anywhere. Dialogue is a two-way street. Too many people settle for mutual monologues running side by side, two one-way lanes that never cross. The ability to give and take over a stretch of minutes, to speak, then listen, respond, then ask a question, is the dance of good conversation. Nancy and I have noticed that when we end up doing most of the listening at a dinner, it's unlikely we'll become friends with the other couple. When ping pong happens, we usually do.

Repair. Every conversation of any consequence eventually breaks. Someone misunderstands. Someone takes something the wrong way. Someone says a thing they didn't quite mean. The communicating young person can come back to the broken place and fix it, rather than walking away, holding a grudge, or

escalating. Repair is the most adult of the four, and the one most parents skip in the training, which is why so many adults end up unable to do it. A child who learns to say *I think I came across wrong, let me try that again*, or *Can you say what you said before, I don't think I got it the first time*, is exercising the muscle that will hold their adult relationships together when the weather turns.

Expression, reception, conversation, repair. Four muscles, one skill. A child with all four becomes someone rare. One with none becomes hard to talk to, hard to listen to, and hard to repair with, which is to say, hard to be close to.

It also helps to name the four common ways communication breaks down in young people. They show up over and over, and the names let you point at them. **Hiding**: having something to say but never saying it. **Broadcasting**: saying it without checking whether anyone is receiving. **Steamrolling**: talking over, interrupting, refusing to let the other person finish. And what I call **mind-reading expectation**: expecting others to know what you want or feel without telling them, then getting angry when they fail to guess. The fourth one causes more family friction than the other three combined, and naming it gives a parent diagnostic vocabulary for something they probably argue about every week.

A small story. Our daughter-in-law Angela was telling me last spring about a moment with our older granddaughter, Juniper, then about 5. Juniper had been simmering for half an hour about a perceived injustice from earlier in the day, growing visibly more

upset, and finally erupted at the dinner table over something unrelated. Angela stopped the moment cold and said, gently, “Honey. I think you have something to say. Would you like to say it?” Juniper, who had clearly been waiting to be invited, said it. Once it was out, the steam went out of her. They talked. It got handled. What struck Angela later was how visibly relieved Juniper had been to be asked. Five-year-olds, it turns out, are already practicing the patterns they'll use at 35. Hiding is the early version of every adult relationship that ends because someone never said the thing.

Why this skill matters more than most parents realize

Three threads of research, all useful for parents.

The first is the work on emotional intelligence, the construct Daniel Goleman popularized in the mid-1990s and that researchers have tested rigorously since. The durable finding is straightforward. EQ, the capacity to recognize and manage emotions in oneself and others, predicts a wide range of outcomes, from academic achievement to social functioning to long-term well-being. Unlike IQ, it is trainable, and the window covered by this book is when that training pays the most.¹ The two muscles closest to communication, reading what another person is feeling and putting your own internal state into words, are what Goleman's framework predicts will pay forward.

The second is the longitudinal research on early conversation. A long line of studies has found that the volume and quality of back-and-forth exchanges between adults and young children predicts language development, school readiness, and a range of later academic and social outcomes more reliably than nearly any other environmental factor.² The key variable is not how many words a child hears. It's how many real exchanges they have. Moments where they say something and an adult takes it seriously enough to respond to the substance of it. Kids raised on real conversation arrive at adolescence with thousands of reps of expression, reception, and repair. Those who haven't had those exchanges arrive with far fewer.

The third is the introvert-extrovert research, most influentially synthesized by Susan Cain in her book *Quiet*, which I recommend to almost every parent who has ever worried about a quiet child. Cain assembled a large body of evidence showing that introverts and extroverts aren't better or worse at communication, just different in their natural patterns, and that schools and parenting cultures in the West have been quietly training quiet children to feel their style is a deficit.³ The cost has been substantial. Many of the most thoughtful, deep-listening communicators in any room are introverts who were told as kids that their quietness was a problem. The reframe, that communication is a skill independent of personality and that quiet young people can become some of the strongest communicators in any room, is one of the more useful gifts a parent can give a quieter child.

Three threads. Three angles. The same finding. Young people raised with real exchange, coached toward emotional vocabulary, and freed from the assumption that personality is the same thing as communication skill grow into adults whom other adults want to talk to.

How to tell where your child stands

On expression: When your child has something they want or need, do they say it clearly, or orbit around it? Listen to how they ask for things, describe what happened at school, or explain a frustration. A young person who can name what they want, briefly and directly, is exercising the muscle. One who needs you to guess, or who never quite arrives at the point, is not.

On reception: When someone is talking to your preteen, do they take it in, or are they waiting for their turn? You can usually see it. A kid who is receiving makes eye contact, asks a follow-up question, or responds to the substance of what was said. One who isn't jumps to their own topic the moment the other person stops speaking.

On conversation: Can your teen sustain a real back-and-forth? Watch the next time they're talking with an adult who isn't a parent. Do they answer, then ask? Do they keep the ball moving? Or does the exchange die after one return because they had nothing to send back?

On repair: When a conversation goes wrong, can your adolescent come back to it? Watch what happens after the next argument with a sibling or friend. A young person who can say *I shouldn't have said that*, or *I think I misunderstood you*, is practicing the most adult muscle in the chapter. One who walks off and waits for the discomfort to fade is not.

You don't need a perfect picture. You need a working one. Once you can see the four muscles and the four misses, you'll see them in nearly every interaction your child has, and you'll start noticing the small moments where a brief intervention from you builds the skill that was about to atrophy.

Before we go further

The hardest thing about coaching communication in young people is that the coaching itself is a communication act, and the parent's own patterns transmit far more than anything they say about it. If you steamroll your child while explaining that they shouldn't steamroll their sibling, the demonstration overrides the lesson every time. If you hide things from your spouse and then ask your teen why they didn't tell you about the bad grade, the example you have set is louder than the question you are asking.

This is uncomfortable, but it's also good news. The same daily life that gives you a thousand opportunities to coach your child gives you a thousand opportunities to model what you're coaching. A parent who lets a tense conversation with their spouse end in

repair, in front of their child, has demonstrated more than any direct lesson would. A parent who apologizes to their child for a moment they handled badly has shown what expression looks like under pressure. A parent who listens to a long, rambling, unfocused story from a 7-year-old without interrupting to fix the syntax has shown what reception is.

The other thing worth saying directly is that conflict isn't the enemy of communication. It's the test of it. A young person who has never had to disagree with anyone, hold a position under pressure, or repair after friction hasn't practiced the skill. They've only practiced agreement. Real communication develops in the friction, not the smooth water, which means you'll have to allow more friction in your home than you may have been inclined to. The alternative is a teen who functions only inside frictionless conversation, which is to say, one who functions almost nowhere as an adult.

A child whose attempts to speak are received, even clumsily, learns that their voice matters. One whose attempts are dismissed, finished for them, or corrected before the sentence ends learns the opposite. Both lessons stick.

That's the fourth skill. Resourceful is how a child begins.

Responsible is how they carry the weight. Resilient is how they keep going when the weight is hard. Communicative is how they stay connected to other people while they carry it. The last of The Five is what brings the rest together.

Communication is what happens between two people.

Collaboration is what happens when a whole group has something to do.

Notes

1. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995). For the most rigorously tested empirical version of the construct, see Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, "Emotional Intelligence," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 9, no. 3 (1990): 185–211. On trainability in children, see Marc A. Brackett et al., "Emotional Intelligence: Reconceptualizing the Cognitive-Emotional Loop," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 5 (2015): 368–373.
2. The foundational empirical work on conversational turn-taking and child development is Rachel R. Romeo et al., "Beyond the 30-Million-Word Gap: Children's Conversational Exposure Is Associated with Language-Related Brain Function," *Psychological Science* 29, no. 5 (2018): 700–710. The original "thirty million word gap" claim from Hart and Risley (1995) has been refined; current research emphasizes back-and-forth exchanges rather than raw word counts.
3. Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012). For the underlying personality research, see the long tradition of work on introversion-extroversion in the Five Factor Model, particularly Robert R. McCrae and Paul T. Costa Jr., *Personality in Adulthood: A Five-Factor Theory Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2003).

Chapter 7

Collaboration

The Ability to Work Well with Others

Navigating Europe

If we had to pick a favorite single month in our family's history, it would be the 30 days we spent in Europe. When each son graduated from high school, we took everyone on a trip to a place he picked. Josh and Jesse chose the Bahamas. Jeff chose Europe. We had just sold our Scottsdale house at the peak of a real estate boom, and I'd ended one job without yet accepting another, so we took an entire month to tour England, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and France. Catching planes, staying in hotels, boarding trains, sightseeing and figuring out how to feed three growing sons (18, 16, and 12) on a budget required dozens of decisions a day. Each person oversaw their own luggage. We traveled as a pack, Team Nelson, working out every situation as it came. Nancy and I marveled at how well they all did, rushing around, foraging for food we could afford, and adapting on the run.

A few stand out. We squeezed onto a packed train to Wimbledon, waited a couple of hours in line for tickets, and then ran into a stranger willing to walk the boys into the main stadium for a few games. In Paris, we visited Notre Dame and walked outside to find hundreds of people converging on the square, all wearing white, carrying portable tables, picnic baskets, wine, and music. We'd stumbled into Dîner en Blanc, the annual flash-mob banquet, the moment it began. In Salzburg, we booked one room that turned out so small that three of us slept sideways across the mattress while the other two stretched out on the floor. In Italy, we squeezed into a taxi, luggage and all, that ended up doubling the quoted price once we arrived (yes, that happened again).

The five of us collaborated through every bit of it. Offering preferences, extending grace, sorting through different foods, currencies (pre-Euro), languages, and environments. That month was collaboration in its grown-up form, the same skill we need to get along with others and function as a team.

This fifth skill is where the first four come to live. It's the integration. Which is why we have saved it for last.

What collaboration looks like

Most parenting books treat collaboration as teamwork in the kindergarten sense. Being nice, taking turns, sharing the crayons. That's not wrong, but it's drastically underpowered. Real collaboration includes the niceness, and it also includes a lot of

things kindergarten doesn't cover. Holding the line on quality when a peer wants to cut a corner. Saying no to an idea the rest of the group is excited about. Pushing back on a friend who is dominating the discussion. Taking on a piece of work nobody else volunteered for, without becoming the person who carries the whole project. Stepping back when the group is fine without you, even if you'd rather be at the center.

The skill has four components. They sometimes show up in different orders, depending on temperament.

Chemistry. Collaborating requires figuring out how to get along with other people while pursuing something together, whether that's winning a game, making a memorable vacation, or building a rocket to Mars. It's about reading people, understanding how they function together as opposed to alone, and navigating the dozens of small process issues that come with operating as a team. A youth with a good sense of collaborating shows up with something to offer and stays engaged. But this element has a higher gear, and it's worth naming, because parents recognize it the moment they see it: the ability to influence others. To notice a teammate fading and bring them back. To make a goal feel worth chasing so others lean in rather than coast. I once taught a graduate course at the University of Southern California on motivation, and there are dozens of research-backed models for how it works. At the end of the day, though, the word itself is the clearest guide. *Motivate* comes from a Latin root meaning "to move." Learning to move

others in voluntary ways — not by pressure, position, or volume, but so they genuinely want to — is a core ingredient of social chemistry, not a bonus skill sitting next to it. This is where social-emotional intelligence lives, the capacity Daniel Goleman and the EQ researchers have spent decades documenting. Chemistry is EQ pointed outward at a group. Organizational behavior nerds like me call these the "process" issues that focus on the relational side of teams.

Coordination. A collaborating preteen can synchronize what they're doing with what others are doing. They notice when their part fits with someone else's, when it's blocking someone, when it needs to wait. This is the early form of project management, and it's harder than it looks. Many adults never get to it, which is why so many adult work groups feel chaotic even when the individuals are talented. Professional athletic teams with top-tier talent fail to win championships all the time because they lack cohesion (togetherness) and alignment (working toward a single goal).

Trust. A collaborating teen can let other people do their parts without taking them over. This is the one that capable young people most often fail to learn, because they've discovered, often correctly, that doing the work themselves produces a better result. They have not yet realized that doing other people's work produces a permanently disabled group. Trust, in the collaboration sense, isn't optimism. It's the willingness to let an imperfect

outcome stand because the group's growth matters more than the day's product.

Constructive friction. A collaborating adolescent can disagree without breaking the relationship. They can hold a different view, push back on a bad idea, point out a flaw in the plan, without the friction becoming a rupture. This is what adults call conflict management: keeping disagreement functional rather than letting it turn dysfunctional and keeping the focus on ideas rather than people. It's the most adult of the four facets, and the one most easily killed by parenting that values harmony over honesty. Kids punished for disagreement, even subtly, learn that agreement is what gets rewarded, and they grow into adults who can't push back on a boss with a lousy idea, a partner with a bad plan, or a friend headed for a wrong decision.

Chemistry, coordination, trust, constructive friction. A young person with all four can take a group of ordinary people and produce something none of them could have produced alone, which is what *synergy* means before the word got worn down by corporate use. It's when $2 + 2 = 5$.

Collaboration fails most often in one of two ways. Once you can name them, you can see them. **The Soloist** does everything alone, refuses help, can't delegate, can't trust others to carry their part. Often praised in elementary school as *responsible* or *high-achieving*, they're quietly disabled in any setting that requires partnership, and the disability worsens with age unless someone

interrupts it. **The Coaster** does as little as possible, lets others carry the weight, and shows up only when pushed. They get diagnosed as *lazy* or *disengaged*, but the deeper issue is that they've never learned that what they bring to a group matters to anyone. Most kids drift toward one of these two patterns. Real collaboration is the trained habit that resists both.

All three of our sons played team sports, where they had to work with peers toward common goals. They learned early that getting along with people you don't automatically like or respect takes extra effort. Motivating others to do their best, and encouraging them when they were down, turned out to be as much a part of teamwork as making a good basketball pass or throwing a runner out at first.

Why this skill matters more than most parents realize

A plethora of research supports the importance of collaboration. Three examples illustrate the point. Each comes at it from a different angle, and they converge.

The first is the work on what researchers call *collective intelligence*. A team led by Anita Woolley at Carnegie Mellon ran a series of studies on whether groups have a measurable problem-solving capacity independent of the individual intelligence of their members. They do. Across two studies of nearly 700 people working in small groups on dozens of distinct tasks, Woolley's team found a single statistical factor, which they called *c*, that explained

group performance about as cleanly as IQ explains individual performance. What predicted c was striking. The average IQ of the group barely moved the needle. The IQ of the smartest member moved it less than you would expect. What did move it: the social sensitivity of the group's members, the equality of conversational turn-taking, and appreciation for each other's involvement.¹

The study noted that collective intelligence elevates as people interact with each other, so long as they stay on task and aligned. The surprise finding is that how a group interacts can matter as much as the raw talent inside it. The smartest people in the room, working alone, lose to ordinary people working together well.

A second thread of research is once again illustrated in the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025*, which surveyed more than a thousand large employers covering 14 million workers across 55 economies. The report ranked the skills employers consider “core” for the workforce ahead. Analytical thinking came first. Resilience came third. Leadership and social influence landed in the top five. Across surveys of US employers, teamwork and collaboration sit consistently among the top three skills employers say they cannot find enough of in entering workers.² Technical skill, the assumption goes, can be taught. Collaboration is much harder to install in a 22-year-old who never picked it up. The thing your child's eventual employer will most need from them is what they're working on right now, in your kitchen and your backyard, in every group project and sibling negotiation.

A third thread is the developmental research on cooperation in young children, much of it from Michael Tomasello's lab at the Max Planck Institute. In a now-famous series of experiments, Tomasello's team showed that human toddlers as young as 18 months will spontaneously help an unfamiliar adult who is struggling with a task, without prompting, reward, or even eye contact.³ Humans appear to be wired, very early, for what Tomasello calls *shared intentionality*, the cognitive capacity to hold a goal in common with another person and work toward it together. The capacity is there in infants. What grows between early childhood and adolescence is the skill of executing on it under the friction of disagreement, uneven effort, and the social complexity of any group with its own internal politics. The question for parents is whether their particular kid gets the input that turns the innate capacity into a working skill.

One more thread worth pulling on briefly. In Chapter 3 we leaned on conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality traits, to make the case for responsibility. Collaboration has its own natural Big Five counterpart: **agreeableness**, the trait that captures warmth, cooperativeness, and willingness to compromise.⁴ Like conscientiousness, agreeableness predicts a wide range of life outcomes, from work performance to relationship stability. But trait isn't destiny. The point of this book is that the trained skill, collaboration in this case, can be built in a young person whose default temperament leans less agreeable, and that even the naturally agreeable adolescent still has to learn the disagreement

and friction muscles to be useful in a group. Trait sets the starting line. The training is what makes a thriving adult.

Three threads of research, plus the personality data, point the same direction. Humans were built for this. Modern childhood often fails to give kids the reps that turn the built-in capacity into a working skill. The parent's job, during the years this book covers, is to make sure those reps happen.

How to tell where your child stands

On chemistry: When your son or daughter is part of a group, do they get along well with others? Do they participate without shrinking and speak up without dominating? Do they help motivate the people around them, notice when someone is fading, and bring them back in?

On coordination: Can your preteen sync their work with someone else's? Pay attention to whether they notice when their piece needs to wait, when it's blocking a sibling's piece, when it would help to ask what someone else is doing before charging ahead. A young person who can think in terms of *us* and not only *me* is practicing a habit that most adults never quite acquire.

On trust: Can your teen let someone else do their part? This is the diagnostic for the Soloist pattern, and the one most often missed because the failure looks like a virtue. Watch what happens when a sibling or peer is doing a task more slowly or less well than your kid

would. The one who can let it stand is exercising trust. The one who takes over is not.

On constructive friction: When your adolescent disagrees, can they say so without rupturing the relationship? Watch for the small moments. When they think a sibling's plan is bad. When a friend wants to do something they don't. When a teacher gets something wrong. The young person who can voice the disagreement and stay in the conversation is practicing the most adult muscle in this chapter.

You don't need to score your child on all four in one sitting. You need a working sense, across a few weeks, of which of the four are stronger and which are weaker. Most kids are uneven. The training is in noticing the unevenness and choosing, deliberately, to work on the weaker side.

Before we go further

I want to close this section by saying something the rest of the book will go and prove. The Five in these chapters aren't a list of virtues. They're not five good ideas pulled from a long inventory of parenting wisdom. They're the load-bearing five. Without resourcefulness, a young person can't begin. Without responsibility, they can't carry. Without resilience, they can't keep going. Without communication, they can't connect to the people they need. Without collaboration, they can't do anything with

anyone. Take one away and the structure wobbles. Take two away and it falls.

That's the case for the framework. What the framework doesn't yet tell you is *how* to develop The Five in your particular child and home, in the years you have left of the developmental window. The Five are the destination. The mechanism by which a young person arrives there, the single most efficient training ground for all of them at once, is the subject of the next section of this book.

I'll name it now so the rest of the book doesn't feel like a setup.

The mechanism is leadership. Not leadership as a title or a performance. Not leadership as the loud kid telling others what to do, but leading as a developmental rep. A moment in which a child, preteen, or teen is given a real weight, with others depending on them, and an outcome to accomplish. Those reps, properly designed and properly coached, build all of The Five at once, in conditions no other training ground I've seen comes close to matching. Schools, sports, chores, and lectures can't do this work. Leadership reps can, and they're what the rest of the book is about.

Our family's month in Europe was a leadership rep. Each son had his own luggage to track, his own preferences to advocate for, his own role in the daily negotiation about food and route and time. Nancy and I stayed in charge, of course, but we let them carry as much weight as the situation allowed. The trip wasn't the point. Three sons who came home knowing they could handle something

hard with people they loved, that was the point. That's what only you, the parent, can give your child during the years they're still young enough to receive it.

Collaboration is the fifth skill, and the end of The Five. Resourceful is how a young person begins. Responsible is how they carry the weight. Resilient is how they keep going when it gets hard. Communicative is how they stay connected to others while they carry it. Collaborative is what brings the rest together, so that something gets built that none of them could have built alone.

Five skills. One vehicle. A thriving young person.

The Five Assessment

If you want to do a quick assessment of your child on The Five, you can download a PDF at www.BestParentCourse.com/TheFive.

Although it's a simple survey, it offers a starting point to see where your child, preteen, or teen may be stronger and where they will benefit the most from your effort. Speaking of effort, we're now ready to talk about the one skill that will help you develop The Five in them.

Notes

1. Anita Williams Woolley et al., "Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups," *Science* 330, no. 6004 (2010): 686–688. The studies analyzed 192 groups of two to five people each. For a follow-up review, see Anita Williams

Woolley, Ishani Aggarwal, and Thomas W. Malone, "Collective Intelligence and Group Performance," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 6 (2015): 420–424.

2. World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2025* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, January 2025). The report surveyed more than 1,000 employers representing over 14 million workers across 22 industry clusters and 55 economies. On the gap between technical and interpersonal skill development among entering workers, see also National Association of Colleges and Employers, *Job Outlook 2024* (Bethlehem, PA: NACE, 2024), has tracked employer-rated importance of teamwork and interpersonal skills for over a decade.

3. Felix Warneken and Michael Tomasello, "Altruistic Helping in Human Infants and Young Chimpanzees," *Science* 311, no. 5765 (2006): 1301–1303. See also Michael Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), and Michael Tomasello et al., "Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28, no. 5 (2005): 675–691, plus the substantial follow-up literature from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology over the past two decades.

4. On agreeableness as a Big Five personality trait and its relationship to teamwork and life outcomes, see Robert R. McCrae and Paul T. Costa Jr., *Personality in Adulthood: A Five-Factor Theory Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2003). For the link between agreeableness and team performance, see Murray R. Barrick et al., "Relating Member Ability and Personality to Work-Team Processes and Team Effectiveness," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 83, no. 3 (1998): 377–391.

Part II

The One Skill You Need

Chapter 8

The One that Builds The Five

Your Role in Your Child's Thriving

Asking the right question

So, what is the single skill parents need to catalyze The Five in their children? It begins by focusing on the right issue. Most parents ask the wrong question, and they don't know it.

Walk into the parenting section of any bookstore, scroll through any parenting feed, or sit through a school parent night, and you'll hear a hundred versions of the same one. *How do I get my child to do better at math? How do I help them with their anxiety? How do I manage screen time? How do I get them to do their chores? How do I help them make friends? How do I prepare them for college applications?*

Every one of those questions matters, and every one has its own shelf of books, experts and conferences. But taken one at a time, they miss something. The concern itself isn't wrong; the frame around it is just too small. It says: fix this one thing. And the honest answer usually starts somewhere else, because the thing in front of you is rarely the actual problem. It's a symptom. Underneath it sits a capacity that either got built or didn't. A teen swamped by math anxiety is often just as overwhelmed by pressure of any kind. A preteen who won't touch the chore chart tends not to carry weight anywhere else either. The kid who can't seem to make friends frequently can't read a room in other settings. The visible problem is usually a missing skill, wearing a disguise.

Parents who chase presenting problems spend years running between symptoms. Each intervention makes sense on its own. The cumulative effect usually leaves parents exhausted, kids frustrated, and gains modest enough that they don't hold up. Bad interventions aren't the issue. The wrong question is.

The right question doesn't ask *how do I fix this particular thing*. It asks *what experience develops the underlying capacities that make those particular things work*? Once you ask the right question, the search narrows. You stop hunting for a hundred specific interventions. You start looking for one general training ground. A setting that exercises all of The Five at the same time, with real conditions and consequences. Not a summer camp or extracurricular course. A condition. Something that puts a young person in a situation where they have to figure it out, carry the weight of how it goes, recover when it doesn't go the way they hoped, talk to other people about what to do next, and accomplish goals with and through them. All five at once. Not as a worksheet. As life, sized to their age. So where does that experience live? And what does a parent need to provide it?

The one skill you need

Part I of this book named The Five your child needs to thrive. This chapter names the one skill *you* need as a parent to develop them. They're not the same kind of skill. The Five live in your child. The one must reside in you. Before this chapter goes any further, the distinction has to land cleanly, because the rest of the book depends on it.

The one skill you need is the ability to train your child in leadership.

Before you decide whether I'm right or wrong about that, let me say what I mean by *leadership*, because the word has been so overused in our culture that most readers hear something I don't mean when I say it. In my work and in this book, leadership means *helping people accomplish together what they would not or could not as individuals*. It involves a goal, a group, and the work of coordinating effort toward it. Not a personality, the socialite running for class president, or the overly confident extrovert at recess. A specific skill, with content, that can be practiced and developed.

Here's the part most parenting books would skip and I won't. Not every young person will grow up to be a leader. Some kids carry what I've spent decades calling *natural leader-wiring*, the temperamental and cognitive markers that show up early in young people who go on to lead teams, companies, ministries, movements, classrooms, communities. Many youth don't carry that wiring, and they shouldn't be told they do. A well-intentioned strand of children's curricula claims *everyone is a leader*. It isn't true. Some people lead. Most don't. That's not a flaw. That's how human groups work. If you define leadership the way I have here, you acknowledge that everyone doesn't need to be a leader to be a part of getting things done. We need great team players, those talented in specific areas, and subject matter experts. Leaders gather these individuals and help align them to accomplish larger goals than any one of us can achieve.

I realize that staking a claim that not everyone will become a leader sounds like an argument against this whole chapter. Stay with me. Across two decades of working with young leaders on three continents, I've learned something I didn't expect. The training I designed to develop natural leaders, the curricula, the small reps, the supervised practice of helping a group accomplish something together, develops The Five load-bearing skills in *every* young person who goes through it, regardless of whether they ever lead anything significant as adults. The training reaches everyone. The calling reaches a few. That's the most important idea in this chapter.

So when I say the one skill you need is the ability to train your child in leadership, I don't mean you need to turn your child into a leader. Some of your kids carry the wiring and will lead anyway. A majority don't and won't. Both groups need the same training, because the training, properly delivered, develops The Five abilities every adult requires, whether or not anyone ever follows your child anywhere.

Your job, then, isn't to produce a leader. Your job is to learn how to coach your child through leadership reps sized to their age and temperament, so The Five grow as a byproduct. Part III of this book will teach you that work in detail. The rest of Part II makes the case for why this particular skill, and not some other parental competence, deserves the title of *the one*.

How I got this half-right for most of my career

I have to admit something before we go further, because the argument lands differently if you know how I arrived at it. I've spent most of my adult life working with leaders, training them, studying them, writing about them. First as a young leader myself, then with adult leaders, and currently as a leadership professor. Two decades ago I founded an organization called KidLead, dedicated to identifying and developing young people with natural leader-wiring. The kids who, by temperament and cognitive style, would likely lead others as adults. We worked in eight countries, training thousands of potential leaders. We've seen great results. For most of those years, I had it half right.

Here's what I had right. Leadership names a real, identifiable, trainable capacity. It often shows up early. It can be developed in young people who carry the wiring for it, and they grow up to lead more effectively than peers. None of that has changed for me. KidLead's mission remains the same.

Here's what I had wrong. I treated the training as if its only valid recipient was the future leader. My goal, I thought, was to produce more leaders. Find the kids with the wiring. Equip them. Send them out. By giving them a 10 to 35 year head start, getting to them while they're moldable and not moldy, we would see more effective and ethical leaders in society. Everyone else would draw

from whatever else childhood had on offer. Math team, soccer, faith community, summer camp, family chores, the usual mix.

Somewhere in the last decade, I noticed something I should have seen sooner. The young people going through our leadership training weren't just becoming better leaders. They were becoming more resourceful, more responsible, more resilient, better communicators, and more effective collaborators. The kids without leader-wiring, the ones who joined our programs because a parent signed them up, or a friend pulled them in, or they happened to be in the cohort, came out noticeably more capable across all five dimensions than peers who hadn't gone through it. Almost none of those preteens and teens grew up to lead anything significant. They didn't need to. They'd already gotten the developmental payoff.

That's the shift this book rests on. Leadership training, at the young person's level, in age-appropriate reps, produces leadership outcomes in the few wired for it, and it produces The Five in everyone who participates. The leadership work serves as the training. The Five arrive as the outcome that reaches every kid, whether or not anyone ever follows them anywhere.

This puts a particular skill need in the parent's hands. Not the skill of leading, and not the skill of producing a leader. The skill of *coaching a young person through leadership reps*. Designing them, sizing them, watching what happens inside them, knowing when to step in and when to stay out, and knowing what to say in the

minutes after one ends. That's the parental competence this book treats as *the one*.

Note: *A leadership rep (repetition) is a structured chance for your child to practice the actual moves of leading other people toward a real goal, with stakes, in a context safe enough to fail. The word rep comes from athletics and the gym, a single instance of an exercise, performed deliberately, that builds ability through repetition. Leadership grows the same way. A kid doesn't become a capable leader by reading or hearing about leadership or being told they're a leader. They become one by leading something, then something else, then something a little harder, dozens of times across years.*

Why this training develops all of The Five

Here's the case, one capacity at a time. The thread running through each is what learning to lead quietly builds underneath. A project, a club, an event, a younger sibling, a team that lasts an afternoon. Put a young person in a situation that demands leadership in real time, and The Five grow.

Resourcefulness

A preteen practicing leadership in a small group hits problems adults rarely prepared them for. The materials don't arrive. The teammate doesn't show. The plan doesn't survive its first contact with reality. Someone has to figure something out, and because the work belongs to the youth, the someone has to be them. A child doing homework can wait for help. A young leader-in-training

cannot. The structure takes the wait-and-be-told option off the table. Even a kid who will never lead anything significant as an adult, going through a rep at 10, encounters a dozen small moments where resourcefulness offers the only way forward. The skill grows in those moments, not in a curriculum about resourcefulness.

Picture an 11-year-old running the lemonade stand at a church fundraiser. Two cups left, line of customers, the pitcher empty, no adult standing within 10 feet. She figures it out. Switches to iced tea. Tells the next customers what's happening. Sends a younger sibling to find more cups. None of those moves came from a worksheet. The situation produced them. She may never run a company. The resourcefulness she built that afternoon will show up in every adult situation she ever faces.

Responsibility

Practicing leadership builds responsibility in a way no other developmental experience can, because in a real rep, the outcome belongs to the one leading. A youth practicing leadership feels, in their body, the difference between *I helped with this* and *this depended on me*. The pull is different. The weight is different. A small failure lands differently. Chores teach the mechanics of follow-through. Schoolwork teaches the discipline of finishing. Only practicing leadership at any scale teaches the specific muscle of carrying an outcome that other people felt too.

I've watched 14-year-olds run summer day camps for younger kids and come back at the end of a week understanding ownership in a way no chore chart could have produced. The 8-year-olds looked up to them. The parents trusted them. The schedule was theirs. The whole thing was theirs. Most of those teens will never run anything as significant again. The week of leading that camp still works on them 20 years later, in families, in careers, in friendships.

Resilience

Practicing leadership generates setbacks the way exercise generates soreness. The plan fails. The teammate quits. The weather doesn't cooperate. The volunteer doesn't show. The audience comes in smaller than hoped. The product flops. These aren't catastrophes. They're the texture of every rep ever run. A young person leading anything encounters several small failures in a single afternoon, and the only way through is to recover, reframe, and keep going. The catastrophizing kid we met in Chapter 4 can't lead. The situation takes catastrophizing off the menu, because the group still has to eat lunch and someone has to figure out what comes next.

Resilience built this way doesn't require a special program. It's the residue of having led, repeatedly, through small failures the young person had to recover from in front of other people. Even if leading never becomes their adult role, the recovery muscle they build will carry them through the day a job ends, a marriage strains, or a child becomes harder to raise than expected.

Communication

A young person practicing leadership has to talk. Explain what they're doing. Ask for help. Give an instruction. Repair a misunderstanding. Read a room. Adjust on the fly. They have to listen, because they need information from the people they're working with to make the next call. They have to repair, because the first version of any instruction almost always gets misheard. Communication doesn't get practiced abstractly here. The situation demands it, immediately, with consequences for getting it wrong. That's why kids who practice leadership develop communication faster than kids who don't. The work won't let them avoid it.

The quiet adolescent often surprises adults here. Given a real situation, with weight, stakes, and others depending on them, the quiet one often communicates more clearly than the chatty one, because they've been listening their whole life and now have something they need to say.

Collaboration

Leadership and collaboration get presented as opposites. They aren't. The young person leading a project, even at the smallest scale, becomes the most collaborative person in the group, because they have to make it happen. They see how each member contributes. Coordinate the parts. Decide when to step in and when not to. Manage the friction that real cooperation produces. The four facets of collaboration we mapped in Chapter 7, chemistry, coordination, trust, constructive friction, get exercised

at once in any meaningful rep. The young person learns them not as concepts but as the lived texture of getting something done with people who don't see it the way they do.

Five capacities. One vehicle. The reps don't work the capacities separately. All five fire together, in the same situation, on a single afternoon. There's the leverage. A Saturday morning practicing leadership at a child's level can produce more developmental input across The Five than a week of school plus a sports practice plus a chore chart combined. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. And it works regardless of whether the youth will ever lead anything significant as an adult.

What about everything else?

A reasonable parent reading this already wants to push back. *What about school? Sports? Music? Chores? Faith communities? Service trips? The kid's job at the grocery store? Aren't those building these skills too?*

Honest answer: yes, some of them, some of the time, partially.

None of them does the whole job. Here's the assessment of each, because the case for leadership reps doesn't need to overstate itself by pretending the alternatives are worthless. They aren't. They're incomplete.

School. Develops some communication and a thin slice of collaboration in group projects. Doesn't typically build resourcefulness (the structure provides answers), responsibility in

the full sense (the consequences land on the student's own grade, not other people), or resilience past the level of test-taking pressure. School delivers content. It wasn't designed to develop The Five. The good ones know this. The great ones build in leadership opportunities for exactly this reason.

Sports. Builds resilience well, communication moderately, collaboration on a team (if it's a team sport), and modest responsibility. Builds almost no resourcefulness, because the coach designs the practice and calls the plays. Sports often get credited with developing all of The Five because they develop two or three of them visibly, and the visibility convinces parents the rest are coming. They mostly aren't. The athlete who has only been an athlete has had thousands of reps of one thing and almost none of leading anything.

Chores. Build responsibility, particularly the follow-through facet, and not much else. The young person doing chores doesn't practice resourcefulness (the task is defined), resilience (the stakes are low), communication (the work is solitary), or collaboration (no one else is involved). Chores matter. They don't suffice.

Music lessons. Build perseverance and disciplined follow-through, both real and valuable. Don't typically build collaboration unless the young person plays in an ensemble where they have to lead a section, and don't build resourcefulness, because the practice gets structured by the teacher. A piano student who has played for 10 years can remain remarkably underdeveloped in the other four.

Faith communities. Vary widely. The best ones hand young people real leadership reps starting young. Leading a small group, organizing a service project, teaching the younger kids. Those communities run this book's curriculum without calling it that. Many others provide only attendance and instruction, which doesn't build any of The Five. The variable isn't the faith. It's whether the young person ever gets handed real weight.

Service trips and volunteering. Often serve the parent's sense of meaning more than the child's development. The well-designed ones build communication and collaboration through real work alongside others. The badly designed ones build a Pinterest album and a college essay. The variable, again, is whether the young person carries real weight, or whether the adults run the operation and the child shows up.

A real job. The 15-year-old volunteering at a charity event, the summer camp, the lawn-care business they started themselves. That counts as leadership practice, depending on how it's structured. If they have to show up, solve problems, manage customers, work with coworkers, and own outcomes, all of The Five get exercised. A real job ranks among the best developmental experiences a teenager can have, and it's been quietly disappearing from American adolescence for two decades. And most organizations today cannot hire until 16, past the prime time to develop The Five.

Nothing on the list lands as bad. Some of it lands as wonderful. But none of it, on its own, produces a young person who has practiced all five skills at the same time, in real conditions, with real stakes. Practicing leadership does. That's the case.

Before we go further

If you're a parent who has been investing heavily in interventions for specific problems, I'm not telling you to stop. The math tutor may have been exactly what your child needed in sixth grade. The therapist may have saved a marriage or a life. The sports league may have given your son the best friend he has now. The argument isn't that those interventions don't matter. The argument is that they don't add up to a thriving young person. Capacity does. And capacity grows somewhere specific.

That somewhere specific lives inside leadership reps, sized to age, designed for the child you have, coached by the adult who knows them best. Which is you. Your child may never lead anything as an adult, and that's fine. Most won't. What they will do, if you give them this training in the years that matter, is carry into adulthood The Five abilities that the practice quietly builds. Part III will teach you the practical work. Designing the reps, sizing the weight, coaching what happens inside them, handling what happens when one goes wrong. Before we get there, two chapters of finishing the case. Why the years between 5 and 15 sit at the highest-leverage point for this work, and why, no matter what the school says, the

coach says, or the youth group leader says, you, the parent, hold the only position that makes the training possible.

Leadership means helping people accomplish together what they would not or could not as individuals. Not every child will grow up to do that. But every child benefits, across all of The Five, from practicing it at their level in the years that matter most.

The training reaches every child. The calling reaches a few. Your one skill, as the parent, is knowing how to deliver the training.

Chapter 9

The 5-15 Portal

The Most Important Decade

Raising a star

Earlier in this book I mentioned that Jesse, our youngest, was a good athlete growing up. He went on to earn a master's degree in applied physiology and kinesiology from the University of Florida, and he's now preparing to launch an exercise app that creates customized workouts using AI. Over the years he's trained professional athletes across a range of sports. One client is Mookie Betts, who plays for the Los Angeles Dodgers and will almost certainly end up in the baseball hall of fame. As of this book's publication, he's the only active MLB player with four World Series Championship rings. Jesse has been Mookie's personal strength and conditioning trainer since spring training of 2024. What's interesting is how Mookie got there.

When Markus Lynn Betts (his parents chose the names so his initials would be "MLB") was a young boy growing up in Tennessee, Little League coaches told his mother he was simply too small to

play baseball. Diana didn't accept the verdict. She went to league organizers, found other kids in similar situations, and pulled together a team so her son could play. At the time, Mookie was a boy who loved the game and had no real idea what his mother was doing behind the scenes. He just knew he got to play. He was seven.

Less than two decades later, he's one of the best players in the world. He didn't get there alone or on sheer talent. Someone advocated for him during the window when it mattered most, and because that opportunity was used rather than missed.

A lot of well-meaning parents miss a temporary, strategic window they never knew was a deadline. I call it the 5–15 Portal. It's the decade-long (plus or minus a year) stretch when a young person is most capable of learning the leadership skills that build The Five, and when a parent is still the primary voice in their head. For most families, the decade comes and goes while everyone is busy with school, work, sports, and the next item on the calendar. The portal opens. The portal closes. Nobody looks up. This chapter is about not missing it.

What a portal is

The word *portal* comes from the Latin *porta*, meaning gate or gateway. It originally described the entrance to a cathedral or grand building, the place where you crossed from outside to inside.

A portal isn't a hallway. It's a threshold. You pass through it, and on the other side, things are different. The space behind you closes.

The 5–15 Portal is that kind of threshold. There's a stretch of about 10 years when a young person's cognitive abilities, social awareness, and character formation converge in a way they never have before and never will again. After it closes, the next predictable opening for formal leadership training, in most lives, comes between 35 and 50, when people rise in their organizations and finally get sent to a training program. If that gap surprises you, it should. We start teaching reading and math at five. We wait, on average, 40 additional years to teach the skill that decides whether someone can organize a group of human beings around a shared goal.¹

This chapter makes the case for why the portal opens around age 5, why it begins closing around age 15, and why the bullseye, the highest-leverage years inside the window, sits roughly between 10 and 13. Most of our work since 2005 has taught us to focus intentional leadership training on those four years for maximum results.

Why the portal doesn't open earlier

Children before age 5 do all kinds of charming proto-leadership things. The 4-year-old who organizes the playground game, the toddler who tells the puppy what to do, the preschooler who runs a tea party with stuffed animal staff. These are real and worth

noticing. They aren't yet leadership in the sense this book uses the word.

Two things are missing before age 5, and both matter. The first is the social sophistication required to read what other people are thinking and adjust accordingly. *Theory of mind*, the developmental capacity to model another person's mental state, doesn't fully come online until around age 4 or 5.² Before it does, a child can give instructions but can't yet see whether the instructions landed, the listener is confused, someone's feelings got hurt, or the group is drifting away from the goal. They're not coordinating effort. They're narrating their own desires out loud and hoping others follow.

The second is language. Leadership requires saying what you mean clearly enough that other people can act on it, asking the right question at the right moment, and naming what's going wrong in a group when it's not going well. The vocabulary and syntax for that work haven't fully assembled in most kids before five. They can communicate but they can't yet articulate.

There are exceptions, always. The unusual 4-year-old with advanced language and social attunement can begin doing recognizable leadership work, and parents of such children should pay attention to it. For most, though, the foundation isn't laid until around 5, which is when, by no accident, formal schooling begins in most cultures. The world treats 5 as the start of structured social

life for the same reason this book does. It's when the basic ingredients for leading other humans become available.

What the window provides

Once a child crosses into the portal, several developmental currents start working at the same time, and they reinforce each other in a way they won't once the window closes. The brain is in its second great plasticity window. The first happens in infancy, when the basic architecture gets laid down. The second runs through childhood and into early adolescence, when the pathways that handle complex social cognition, self-regulation, and abstract reasoning get pruned and strengthened based on use.³ What a youth practices during this stretch becomes structurally easier for them to do for the rest of their life. What they don't practice becomes structurally harder.

Identity is forming but not fixed. The preteen is figuring out who they are, what they're good at, what kind of person they want to be. A young person who, during these years, has the experience of being the one others looked to, even in a small situation, carries forward an internal story that includes the words *I can do that*. One who never has that experience carries forward a different story. Both are sticky.

Social cognition is sharpening. Reading a room, picking up on group dynamics, sensing when a friend is about to quit, knowing when to push and when to back off, these skills develop in this window or

they develop slowly and incompletely afterward. The research on emotional intelligence and social skill development consistently identifies this stretch as the most teachable.⁴

The moral compass is being calibrated. Moral development, like cognitive development, runs on a schedule that sits squarely inside the portal. Before age 7 or so, most children operate on transactional morality. The question they ask is some version of *will I get in trouble*. Around eight or nine, that begins to shift. Lawrence Kohlberg's foundational research on the stages of moral development, building on Piaget, mapped this progression carefully. What he called *conventional moral reasoning* becomes available in middle childhood, the capacity to understand fairness as a principle rather than self-interest, to take another person's perspective, to grasp why a rule matters beyond the immediate consequence of breaking it.⁵

Through the years that follow, roughly 10 to 14, something deeper happens. Moral identity forms. The young person stops thinking of themselves as someone who follows rules and starts thinking of themselves as someone who *is* honest, or fair, or loyal, or trustworthy. I had the chance years ago to sit with William Damon in his office at Stanford and talk through his decades of research on this. His finding, which has held up across follow-up studies, is that the moral identity a person carries into adulthood was largely formed by 15. After that, specific moral content can be added or revised. The underlying frame mostly can't.⁶

This is the piece that makes leadership development urgent rather than just useful. Leadership skills, by themselves, are amoral. They build capacity ability, but ability without ethics produces the kind of leader our headlines are full of. Ethics without ability produces the well-meaning person who never quite manages to do much about anything. Both have to be installed, in the same young person, during the same window. Business schools have spent the better part of 40 years discovering that teaching ethics to MBA students is, as the saying goes, like closing the barn door after the horse has bolted. Moral formation happens early or it mostly doesn't happen at all. The parent doing the leadership work during the 5–15 window is also, whether they realize it or not, in the load-bearing position to do the moral work. They aren't separate projects. They're the same project, done by the adult, in the reps, during this key decade.

And the primary social authority in your child's life is still you. Most parents underestimate this one, because it doesn't feel like an advantage until it's gone. Through most of the 5–15 window, when a child is forming a belief about how the world works, the loudest voice in their head is still a parent's. By 16, in most cases, that primary position has been replaced by friends, social media, romantic interests, and the broader peer culture. The replacement is normal and developmentally appropriate. It also means the parent's ability to teach has a shelf life that ends earlier than most parents realize.

The 10–13 bullseye

If the 5–15 Portal is the target, the bullseye, roughly, is ages 10 to 13. Plus or minus a year on either side, depending on the kid. These four years are the highest-leverage point in the whole window, and the reason is structural.

By 10, the developmental ingredients are all in place. Theory of mind is mature. Language is fluent. Abstract reasoning has begun to come online. The preteen can hold a goal in their head, anticipate how other people will respond, and plan more than one move ahead. They are able to lead a small group in something that takes a week to complete, not just an afternoon. They can recover from a failure and try again next Tuesday with a different approach. The cognitive tools required for the kind of leadership work we defined in Chapter 7 are available. There's an old observation that the person we are at 10, typically fourth grade, is largely the person we'll be as an adult. Whether or not the claim holds up at research-grade precision, the fourth-grade year does function as a recognizable threshold in most lives.

At the same time, the preteen isn't yet a teenager in the social sense. Peers matter, but parents still matter more. The romantic and identity-formation pressures of adolescence haven't fully arrived. The dopamine system that makes mid-teens prone to social risk-taking hasn't kicked into its full intensity yet.⁷ The youth can still concentrate. They still take instruction from an adult without it feeling like an attack on their autonomy. They try things

that might look uncool, because the audience that would have made them feel uncool hasn't become the center of their world yet.

It's the developmental sweet spot. Old enough to lead with intent and young enough that the parent is still the primary teacher in the room. If you can only invest seriously in three or four years inside the larger window, focus on these. Everything else you do across the 5–15 stretch will work better if these particular years got used well.

I've watched this play out across thousands of young leaders in our training programs. Kids we started working with at 10 or 11 made significantly more developmental progress in two years than teens we started with at 14. Same curriculum and coaches, but different windows. The earlier ones had room to fail without their identity feeling threatened, and they had parents who were still the loudest voice in their head when they came home to debrief.

Why 16 closes the window

The portal doesn't slam shut at 16, but it narrows sharply around then. These specific causes are worth understanding.

The first is the practical change in a teenager's life. At 16, in most American contexts, they can drive and hold a real job. Their physical world expands beyond what a parent can directly oversee. The leadership work this book describes depends on a parent being close enough to design the reps, watch them happen, and coach

the recovery. When the teen is at the diner working until 10 PM, or out with friends in a car that didn't exist in their life six months ago, the parent's position has structurally changed.

The second is the shift in primary social authority. The research is unusually consistent. Across cultures, peer influence rises sharply through early adolescence and peaks around ages 14 to 17. During those years, the values, opinions, and approval of peers carry more weight in a young person's decision-making than the values of parents, sometimes by large margins.⁸ This is normal. It's how human development is supposed to work. Adolescents need to begin separating from the family of origin to form an adult identity. But for the parent trying to teach leadership, the same content delivered the same way lands differently after 15 than it would have at 12. The teacher hasn't changed, but the audience has.

The third is the internal shift, the one most parents miss because it happens quietly. Somewhere around 15 or 16, most young people begin telling themselves a new story: *I'm basically an adult now*. The story isn't accurate. By every legal, financial, and developmental measure, they're still child-like in important ways. But the felt sense is real and powerful, and it changes how they receive instruction. Advice that would have been welcomed at 11 gets resisted at 16, not because the advice got worse but because the recipient has reclassified themselves as someone who doesn't need it.

Historically, this self-classification wasn't wrong. For most of human history, 16-year-olds were treated as adults. They worked full days, started families, fought wars, and took on the economic and social responsibilities of grown people. Rites of passage landed at or before 16 in nearly every traditional culture: bar mitzvah at 13, confirmation around the same age, the various tribal ceremonies that took a young person across the threshold into adult standing. Modern Western society has extended adolescence by a decade or more, but the human mind didn't get the memo. The 16-year-old still feels like an adult, even when our culture treats them like one only intermittently.

Which means, for our purposes, that the parent who waits until their child is 16 to begin teaching leadership has waited too long. Not catastrophically. The work that would have taken six months at 12 will take two years at 17, and the friction the parent encounters will be steeper at every step. The portal has begun to narrow, and every year past 15, it narrows further.

Your specific window

Chapter 8 made the case that the one skill parents need is the ability to train their child in leadership. This chapter is the timing case for that skill. There's a portal during which your child is uniquely able to learn this work, and during which you are uniquely able to teach it. The two overlap, but they aren't identical.

Your child can keep learning leadership across their whole life. The 42-year-old who finally gets formal training, the 55-year-old promoted into a role they weren't prepared for, the new parent learning to lead a family. Leadership is teachable forever, but what isn't is your particular position to be the teacher.

Your portal as the primary teacher runs roughly from age 5 to 15. After that you're still influential, but you're sharing the room with peers, romantic partners, employers, coaches, social media, and your teen's growing internal sense that they've graduated from your authority. The teaching becomes negotiation. Possible, but slower and less effective than three years earlier. Between 5 and 15, with a peak at 10 to 13, the alignment is as good as it ever gets. Your child is ready to learn. You're still the primary voice in their head. The work you do in this window builds capacities they'll carry for the next 60 years.

The decade is finite. Each year passes once. The good news is that you don't have to be a leadership expert to use this opening well. You have to be willing to set up the reps, stay close enough to coach them, and resist the temptation to hijack the exercises yourself or hand them off to specialists who don't have your position. Part III will walk you through that work. This chapter's job is to convince you that the time to start is now, if your child is in or near the window.

Before we go further

Two honest words for the parent who has done the math and is feeling disappointed. If your child is already past 15, you haven't missed your chance. You've missed the bullseye, which is different. The work is still doable, just harder. Sixteen-year-olds, 17-year-olds, even college students can still learn this material from a parent who hasn't given up on it. The relationship has to be intact, the parent has to be willing to do the work with humility rather than authority, and the young adult has to consent to the partnership. All three are possible, but none is guaranteed.

And if your child is still inside the portal, especially the 10–13 bullseye, take the next few years seriously. The unique decade you're in now is the one your child's adult life will rest on. The parent who realizes this in time becomes a different kind of parent for the years that remain. Not louder or more controlling, but deliberate. Let go of the small daily wins so the long-term capacity has room to grow. That's the shift Part III is built to support.

One more chapter to finish the case, on why you specifically, of all the adults in your child's life, are the only one structurally positioned to do this work. Then we move to the practical playbook.

The portal is open. The years are passing. Don't miss it.

Notes

1. Jack Zenger, "We Wait Too Long to Train Our Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*, December 17, 2012. Drawing on a database of some 17,000 leaders, Zenger found the average age of receiving first formal leadership training was 42. When the poll was repeated in 2021, that average had risen to 46.
2. On theory of mind development, see Henry M. Wellman, *Making Minds: How Theory of Mind Develops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). The classic false-belief task work goes back to Heinz Wimmer and Josef Perner, "Beliefs About Beliefs: Representation and Constraining Function of Wrong Beliefs in Young Children's Understanding of Deception," *Cognition* 13, no. 1 (1983): 103–128.
3. On the second wave of synaptic pruning and neuroplasticity in late childhood and early adolescence, see Jay N. Giedd et al., "Brain Development During Childhood and Adolescence: A Longitudinal MRI Study," *Nature Neuroscience* 2, no. 10 (1999): 861–863. For a more recent review, see Beatriz Luna et al., "An Integrative Model of the Maturation of Cognitive Control," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 38 (2015): 151–170.
4. Marc A. Brackett et al., "Emotional Intelligence: Reconceptualizing the Cognitive-Emotional Loop," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 5 (2015): 368–373. For developmental timing, see also Susanne A. Denham, "Emotional Competence During Childhood and Adolescence," in *Handbook of Emotional Development*, ed. Vanessa LoBue, Koraly Pérez-Edgar, and Kristin A. Buss (Cham: Springer, 2019), 493–541.
5. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). Kohlberg's six-stage model, building on Jean Piaget's earlier work,

identifies the transition into conventional moral reasoning as occurring primarily in middle childhood.

6. William Damon, *The Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth* (New York: Free Press, 1988); see also William Damon and Anne Colby, *The Power of Ideals: The Real Story of Moral Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). On the durability of moral intuitions across the lifespan, see also Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012); Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Marvin W. Berkowitz, *PRIMED for Character Education* (New York: Routledge, 2021). Personal conversation with William Damon at Stanford University.

7. Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014). On adolescent risk-taking and the dopaminergic shift, see B. J. Casey, Sarah Getz, and Adriana Galván, "The Adolescent Brain," *Developmental Review* 28, no. 1 (2008): 62–77.

8. On peer influence peaking in mid-adolescence, see Laurence Steinberg and Kathryn C. Monahan, "Age Differences in Resistance to Peer Influence," *Developmental Psychology* 43, no. 6 (2007): 1531–1543. The study tracked over 3,600 individuals ages 10 to 30 and found that resistance to peer influence increases steadily after age 14, but conformity pressure peaks in early to mid-adolescence.

Chapter 10

You Are The Key

Why Parent's Shouldn't Delegate this Task

A family's dilemma

A family I worked with some years back had done everything modern parenting tells you to do. Two attentive, well-educated parents. A nice neighborhood with good schools. Tutors lined up before any subject became a problem. A therapist on retainer for the teenager who had hit a rough patch in eighth grade. Coaches across three sports. A music teacher. A youth pastor. A college counselor by sophomore year. By every available measure of doing the work, they were doing the work.

Their oldest left for college and lasted one semester. He came home not because he'd failed academically, though that had started. He came home because he had difficulty making decisions, couldn't handle conflict with his roommate, and found it hard

recovering from a couple of bad weeks. The only friendships he knew how to make were the kind that came pre-arranged by an activity. He could write a college-level paper, play three instruments, and run a sub-five-minute mile. But these weren't the skills he needed at 19, alone, in a dorm room in a state he'd never lived in.

The family above is fictional, but the shape of it is a composite of many I've worked with over the decades. The parents had good intentions, loved their son and wanted the best for him. What they'd done, without realizing it, was handed the development of his underlying capacities to a network of specialists who weren't positioned to build them. Each specialist did their part well, but the individual parts didn't add up to a young man who could run his own life. This chapter is about why that happens, and why the only adult who can prevent it is you, the parent.

The quiet outsourcing

The American dream is to reach a place where you can pay other people to do things for you. We hire someone to mow the lawn, launder the clothes, clean the house, cook the food (eating out counts). The problem is taking that mindset into raising kids. Most American parents today, without consciously deciding to, have handed large parts of their child's development over to a network of institutions and specialists. School handles academics. Coaches handle athletic and competitive development. Youth pastors and

rabbis and imams focus on values. Therapists address emotional struggles. Tutors fill gaps. Summer programs deliver enrichment. In many homes the parent has become the logistics coordinator. Drop-offs, pickups, scheduling, payment, food. The development itself happens elsewhere.

This isn't a moral failure. It's the structure of modern childhood. Most parents involved are well-intentioned and working hard. I'm not going to scold anyone for it. But the structure has a consequence nobody designed and few talk about. The specialists running each piece of the pipeline weren't positioned to build the load-bearing capacities a young person needs to thrive. They were positioned to deliver content, instruction, and care inside their specific lane. The Five we've been talking about, resourcefulness, responsibility, resilience, communication, collaboration, fall between the cracks of that pipeline, because they don't belong to any single specialist.

They belong to you. And not because you love your child the most, though you probably do. They belong to you because, in a structural sense, you are the only adult in your kid's life with the four things this work requires.

What only you have

Continuity. You're the only adult who will be there for the entire window. A teacher gets a year. A coach gets a season, occasionally a few. A youth pastor stays about two years on average before

moving on. The therapist is there until the issue resolves or the insurance runs out. The tutor is present until the grade improves. None of these adults will see your kid across the full arc from age 5 to age 15, much less age 5 to 50. You will. The Five don't develop in a semester, but across years, in slow accumulating reps, watched by an adult who can remember what last spring looked like and can tell that this spring is different. By definition, that adult is you.

Proximity. You see your child more than any other adult ever will, and most of what you see isn't scripted. The teacher gets six hours a day, structured, in a room of 25. The coach gets two hours, three times a week, in organized practice. The youth pastor gets 90 minutes on a Wednesday night, maybe. You get the dinner table, the car ride, the bedtime debrief, the morning meltdown, the spilled milk, the bad day at school that comes out in pieces an hour after they walk in the door. The unscripted moments are yours, which is where The Five get exercised and where the coaching happens. Nobody else gets that volume of potential reps with your kid. Not even close.

Stake. You'll be at the wedding, the hospital, the first apartment, the first heartbreak that lands as an adult, the funeral. Other adults move on. You don't. Your investment horizon is the lifetime, and you know it. The teacher who gave your daughter a B in seventh-grade English is not going to be at her bedside when she's 40. You probably will be, or someone like you. What you do now compounds across decades you will be in the room for. Few other

adults are doing this with that horizon in view, because their relationship with your child ends long before the results come in. Yours doesn't. For readers who carry a religious frame, the stake runs deeper still. The sense that this child was given to you to raise, that you will give an account for the work, that the formation of a soul has been placed in your specific hands. Whether you hold that frame or you don't, the structural point still holds. The stake is primarily yours.

Permission. Most parents underestimate this one. You can do things in your child's life that no other adult can do. You can interrupt a meltdown, name a deflection the moment it happens. You sit with your preteen through a grief that doesn't have words yet. You can refuse to fix something they need to handle themselves. You hold a line on a hard conversation across weeks until it lands. The teacher can't do that. The coach can't either. Their roles are bounded by professional and relational limits that don't apply to you. Coaching the hard moments, where The Five get built, is mostly the parent's territory and nobody else's. Other adults can teach your child information. But you shape who they're becoming, because you have the standing to do it.

Continuity, proximity, stake, permission. Take any one of those away and the developmental work this book describes becomes much harder. Take two away and it becomes nearly impossible. The four of them together are what give a parent the position to do this work. No other adult in your kid's life has all four.

Remember Diana, Mookie's mom, from the last chapter? What made her decisive wasn't just timing, though timing mattered. It was that she had the four things only a parent has, and she used them all at once.

What the other adults are for

Nothing in this chapter argues that the other adults in your child's life don't matter. They do, profoundly. The point I'm making is that they're positioned to do specific kinds of work, and the work this book describes isn't in their lane. Here's an honest assessment, with respect for what each of them brings.

Teachers. A great teacher can change a child's academic trajectory, awaken a love of a subject, model intellectual rigor, and notice things a parent might miss. I've seen teachers do work no one else could have done in a young person's life. But the structure constrains them. One year, one classroom, 25 kids, a curriculum to deliver and a test to prepare for. They're not positioned to coach your teen through a resilience rep on a Tuesday night, or to interrupt the deflection pattern that started at age 7. The exceptional teacher who maintains a relationship with a student across years becomes something more like a mentor, which is rare and wonderful. Most teachers, doing their job well, fill an important role but it isn't this one.

Coaches. Inside the structured pressure of competition, coaches can develop resilience better than many. A good coach in the right

sport at a key age can be one of the most formative adults in a young person's life. But the relationship is bounded by the season, the sport, and the team. A coach gets to develop a slice of resilience and collaboration. They don't get to coach communication outside the locker room, responsibility beyond the practice schedule, or resourcefulness other than the sport. The youth who has had only athletic coaching has been deeply developed in two of The Five and barely touched in the others.

Religious leaders. Pastors, rabbis, imams, priests, youth ministers. The role is built around values formation, community belonging, and sometimes leadership reps for young people willing to take them. The best youth ministries in any faith tradition are quietly running an excellent version of the work this book describes, putting young people in charge of service projects, small groups, retreats, and mentorship of younger kids. The variable isn't the faith. It's whether the young person ever gets handed real weight inside the religious community. Where they do, the development is real. Where they don't, attendance alone won't build The Five. And even in the best youth programs, the contact is weekly, plus the paid staff turns over every two to three years on average. The parent remains constant.

Therapists and counselors. A good therapist is a gift. They can help a child unpack what they can't talk to a parent about, work through trauma the family didn't cause and can't fix, and offer a perspective the parent can't. The role is clinical, structured around specific

issues, in 50-minute hours, with confidentiality and professional boundaries that prevent the therapist from being the everyday coach of The Five. They're not supposed to be. That isn't their job. The parent who hands general developmental coaching over to a therapist has misunderstood what therapy is and isn't.

Grandparents and extended family. Continuity and stake, often in abundance. Proximity varies enormously depending on geography and family pattern. When all three line up, a grandparent who lives close, sees the child often, and has a real relationship with them, the contribution can be extraordinary. Grandparents are often better positioned to coach certain skills than parents, because they've done it before and have more patience the second time around. They're complements to the parent's work, not substitutes for it.

The wider village. Other parents, neighbors, the friend's mom who watches your kid every Tuesday, the family friend who somehow always knows what your teenager is going through. Real, valuable, sometimes life-saving. Not strategic. The village catches things the parent misses. But it can't be the primary builder of The Five, because no one in the village has all four structural advantages at once for your child. The village can support, but it can't replace.

Books, podcasts, programs, online resources. No book knows your child, and no podcast can interrupt a meltdown at 9 PM on a Tuesday. An app can't sit on the porch with your 14-year-old after

a hard day. Use the resources, but don't mistake them for the work.

Run down the previous list and notice what's true. Every adult on it contributes something real, but none contributes the whole of what your child needs. The pieces only add up when an adult who has all four structural advantages (continuity, proximity, stake, permission) is orchestrating the development the other adults are partially providing. That's you. It's always been you. The job hasn't changed since the first parents raised their children. The illusion that it has changed is what gets families like the one I opened this chapter with into trouble.

You're the general contractor

Here's a way to hold the role that I think helps. You aren't doing this work alone, and you weren't meant to. The teachers, coaches, religious leaders, therapists, grandparents, music instructors, family friends, they're the specialists. You're the general contractor. The plumber is essential. So is the electrician. The framer, roofer, drywall crew, all fill a role. But none of them is building the house. The general contractor is. The specialists are adding the parts they're trained to do, in the order and combination the general contractor lays out.

A general contractor doesn't need to be more skilled than each specialist. They need to know which specialists to hire, what each one is for, how the parts fit together, and what the whole house is

supposed to look like when it's done. They're the only one with the full picture.

Translate that to parenting. You don't need to be a better academic instructor than your child's teacher, or a superior athletic coach, a better therapist than the counselor. You need to know what each of those adults is for, what they can't do for your child, what the whole young person you're raising should be able to do by the time they leave your home, and which of The Five is currently underbuilt.

The discomfort of accepting this

When parents realize they're the general contractor, the common first reaction is panic. They look at the credentials of the teachers, the experience of the coaches, the training of the therapists, and conclude that those adults are obviously more qualified. They feel underqualified by comparison. They think, *I'm just a parent. Those people are professionals.*

The reasoning is wrong. Those professionals are more qualified at their specific contributions, but none are more qualified at being the parent of your child. That role isn't credentialed. It's positional. You don't need a degree to do it. You need to know what you're doing, which is what the rest of this book is for.

A second reaction is regret. The parent reads a chapter like this one and thinks, *I've already wasted years. I outsourced everything. My kid is 12 and the foundation isn't built.* I understand the feeling. I've

had it about my own parenting more than once. Here's the honest response. The years aren't wasted as long as the relationship is intact. Skills can be built starting today. The Five don't require a particular starting age, they just become harder to install the longer the window has been open without anyone using it. Twelve is fine. Fourteen can work. Even 16, with a parent willing to be honest with their young adult about why they're changing approach, is workable. Tomorrow is a worse day to start than today. Today is fine. The proverb states that the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.

A third reaction is exhaustion. The parent who has been running all the logistics already, the carpool, the schedule, the meal prep, the emotional management of a household, reads this chapter and thinks, *and now I have to be the general contractor too?* The honest answer is that you've been the general contractor all along. You just haven't had the framework to do it deliberately. The work isn't extra. It's what you're already doing, oriented toward a clearer goal. Part III is designed to make the deliberate version easier than the accidental version, not harder.

Get ready

You are the parent, the adult in your child's life with continuity, proximity, stake, and permission. No school, coach, congregation, therapist, friend, resource, book, or app has all four. Most have one. The combination is yours alone, and that is what the work requires. The work this book describes belongs to you not because

nobody else loves your child, but because they are not positioned to do it.

Part I named the destination. Part II has now named the vehicle, the years, and the driver. The destination is The Five. The vehicle is leadership reps. The years are 5 to 15. The driver is you. What we haven't covered yet is how to drive. That's Part III.

You are the only adult in your child's life with the position to do this work. The rest of this book is on how to do it well.

Part III

How to Do It

Chapter 11

The Just-Right Rep

Age, Ability, and Aptitude

Starting early

I grew up an only child on an Iowa farm, which meant I learned to drive earlier than most. By the time I was 10, my dad would set me on his lap behind the wheel of the tractor or the pickup, his hands resting near mine on the wheel, his foot ready to take the pedals if something went wrong. He'd talk me through what I was doing, correct me when I drifted, and let me feel what it was like to move a piece of machinery across a field.

By 12 I was driving the tractor on my own. And when my dad needed to load hay, I'd drive the pickup slowly through the field while he walked alongside, tossing bales into the bed. By 14, I had a learner's permit, which meant I could drive on roads with an adult in the vehicle. By 16, I had a license and the keys to the car.

Nobody, anywhere in my upbringing, ever handed the car keys to a 12-year-old and said, "Have fun, go grab some groceries." That would have been negligent. The whole point was the progression. Each year, a little more weight. Each year, a little less support. By the time I was old enough to drive alone, the skill was already built. The license was just paperwork catching up to what was already true.

This is exactly how leadership skills develop. The mistake most parents make isn't that they refuse to give their kid leadership reps. The mistake is that they don't size the weight correctly. They hand a 5-year-old a job that requires a 12-year-old's judgment, watch it crash, and conclude their kid isn't ready for leadership. Or they hand a capable 14-year-old something so trivial that no real leading is required, and wonder why the kid disengages. Both are sizing errors. Neither is a leadership failure on the kid's part.

This chapter is about how to size the weight.

The just-right principle

Almost a century ago, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky put a name to something every good teacher and parent has known

intuitively. He called it the zone of proximal development. The idea is simple. For any learner, there's a zone of tasks they can already do alone, a zone they can't do even with help, and in between, a narrow band of tasks they can do with the right kind of support from someone more skilled. That narrow band is where learning happens.

Hand a kid a task in the first zone and they're bored, because there's nothing to figure out. Hand them a task in the third zone and they're overwhelmed, because the gap is too big to bridge. Hand them a task in the middle zone, with the right amount of support, and they grow. The skill stretches. The support gets faded back over time as the kid builds capacity, until what used to require help can now be done alone, and the zone shifts upward for the next attempt. There's another name for the concept: the Goldilocks Method. Not too soft, not too hard. Just right.

That's what my dad was doing with the tractor without ever having read a word of Vygotsky. He kept me in the zone. At 10, on his lap, with his hands near mine, I was learning. At 12, alone in the seat with him walking nearby, I was learning. At 14, on real roads with him in the passenger seat, I was learning. He'd have killed me, by accident, if he'd put me alone in the truck at 10. He'd have stunted me if he'd kept his hands on the wheel at 14. Either error wastes potential.

The same principle runs through leadership development. The skill grows in the zone where the rep is hard enough to stretch and not

so hard that it collapses. The whole craft of being the general contractor we talked about back in Chapter 9 comes down to knowing where that zone is for your kid right now, and how to keep nudging it upward. Which raises the obvious question. How do you figure out where the zone is?

Three factors that set the zone

Three things shape what your child can handle. Get a feel for each one and you'll be able to size most projects intuitively, without needing a chart.

Age

Age is the crudest of the three, but worth naming first because it's the main one most parents pay attention to. Developmental capacity roughly tracks with age. A 6-year-old can lead a two-person team in setting the dinner table. A 10-year-old can lead a room makeover. A 14-year-old can run a small business. A 16-year-old can coordinate a multi-day service project for a youth group.

Age matters because the brain genuinely is developing. Executive function, the cluster of skills behind planning, impulse control, and working memory, comes online gradually across childhood and isn't fully mature until the mid-twenties. A 9-year-old isn't being difficult when they can't hold five steps in their head at once. They are 9. The wiring is still being built.

That said, age alone is the worst of the three predictors. Two 10-year-olds can be in completely different places developmentally. Two 14-year-olds can require different reps. If you size projects purely by age, you'll routinely under-challenge half your kids and overwhelm the other half. Age is a starting point, not the answer.

Ability

Ability is what your child has shown they can do, based on previous reps. The observable track record. Have they led a team before? How many times? How did the last few projects go? Where do they still struggle? What can they do solo now that used to require your help?

This is the factor most parents underuse, because it requires paying attention across time. A preteen who's run three successful room makeovers can handle a more complex one. One who's never led a team can't jump straight into the day-off trip. Ability is built one rep at a time, and your job as the general contractor is to keep mental notes on what's in the bank.

A simple way to track it: after each project, ask yourself one question. What just got easier for them? Maybe it's recruiting helpers. Maybe it's handling a disagreement between team members. Maybe it's making a decision without checking with you first. Each of those represents capacity moving from the supported zone into the independent zone. The next project can push a little further into the unfamiliar.

Ability is also where you see whether your child is ready to step up or needs another rep at the current level. If three room makeovers in a row have gone smoothly, they're ready for something harder. If the last one wobbled, run another one at the same level before pushing higher. There's no virtue in moving fast. There's a lot of virtue in moving steadily.

Aptitude

Aptitude is the natural wiring. Some children are simply better at certain things than others, the same way some are better at math or music or running. Leadership is no different. The research on giftedness, dating back to Joseph Renzulli's foundational work at the University of Connecticut in the 1970s and 80s, identifies leadership as one of several domains where some individuals show pronounced natural talent. Renzulli's three-ring model describes gifted behavior as the overlap of above-average ability, creativity, and what he calls task commitment, the drive to stick with something and see it through. Kids vary on all three.

The US Department of Education still includes leadership in its official list of gifted and talented domains, even though most schools focus only on the academic ones. Coaches see the same pattern in their own field. Some kids are kinesthetically gifted from the start, faster, more coordinated, sharper in eye-hand dexterity than their peers. Leadership giftedness is just as real, just less commonly named.

Practically, this means two things for you as a parent. First, if your child has high leadership aptitude, you can push faster than the age-and-ability chart would suggest. A naturally gifted 10-year-old leader who has had good coaching and several reps can handle situations that would be too much for an average 12-year-old. The aptitude is real, and treating a high-aptitude child like an average one bores them and wastes their capacity.

Second, if your preteen does not have high leadership aptitude, that's also fine and worth being honest about. They can still build all of The Five through leadership reps. The reps just need to be sized to their real wiring, not to an aspirational version of it. A youth who finds leading other people genuinely hard will grow more from a well-sized small rep than from a stretched one that ends in shame. The destination isn't being a high-aptitude leader. The destination is being a person who can handle their own life and contribute to others.

Aptitude is also where you'll notice differences between siblings, which is a common source of parental confusion. The older sibling led the lemonade stand at 8, so when the younger one turns 8 you offer the same project, and it falls apart. That doesn't mean the younger one is failing. It probably means they have different aptitude, pace, or both. Size for who they are, not for the sibling who came before.

When the three factors disagree

Most of the time, age, ability, and aptitude line up roughly. The 11-year-old with a couple of reps under their belt and average aptitude is ready for an 11-year-old's project. Easy. But sometimes the factors point in different directions, and that's where parental judgment has to engage.

Here are the patterns to watch for:

High aptitude, low ability. Your 9-year-old shows a lot of natural leadership wiring but has had almost no reps. The temptation is to assume the aptitude alone means they're ready for hard projects. They aren't. Aptitude without practice is potential, not skill. Start at a normal age-appropriate level and let them move through the progression faster than average, but don't skip the early reps. These reps build the muscle that the aptitude is waiting to use.

High ability, low aptitude. Your 13-year-old has done a lot of leadership reps, and they've gone fine, but leading isn't their natural happy place. They'll always find it a little draining. That's okay. Keep sizing reps at their ability level, not beyond. They don't need to become a high-aptitude leader. They need to keep building The Five, which they're doing. Honor the work.

High age, low ability. Your 15-year-old has never really led anything because the opportunity never came up. Now you're starting late, which is fine. But don't skip the foundations. A 15-year-old's first

leadership rep should be sized like a younger child's first rep, not like a 15-year-old's typical rep. The age gives them a faster runway through the early levels, but they still need to run them.

Social-emotional development out of step with age. Some 12-year-olds carry themselves like 16-year-olds. Some 16-year-olds are still figuring out what most 12-year-olds figured out years ago. Social-emotional maturity is its own track, and it matters a lot for leadership because leading other people is fundamentally a social-emotional act. If your child is ahead of their age on this front, you can push faster. If they're behind, slow down and don't worry. The track will catch up.

A rough progression to start with

Treat this as scaffolding, not a curriculum. Use it to anchor your intuition, then adjust based on your specific kid.

Ages 5 to 7. Small, concrete, two-person team. Leading a sibling in setting the table, organizing the toy bin, or planning a simple snack. Short duration, clear goal, immediate result. Parent stays close.

Ages 8 to 10. Three-person team, longer time horizon, more decisions. Room makeover. Lemonade stand. Simple Good Deed Day project. Parent shifts to the whisper-and-coach mode from Chapter 12.

Ages 11 to 13. Multi-step projects with real money and real stakes. Day-off trip planning. Bigger service projects with the

neighborhood. The first attempts at a recurring mini-venture. Parent fades further back.

Ages 14 to 15. Multi-week projects. Running a small business across a season. Coordinating a youth group event. Leading a service project that requires outside partners. Parent is mostly hands-off, available for the occasional Good-Better-Best.

Slide the whole progression earlier for high-aptitude kids and a little later for kids who started late or are still building social-emotional foundations. The progression matters less than the principle: each rep is sized to stretch without breaking.

Two errors to avoid

Sizing mistakes mostly land in two categories. Worth naming both, because the cost shows up months later when you don't realize the rep itself was the problem.

Underweighting: The under-challenged child is the easier mistake to miss, because nothing visibly goes wrong. The project gets done and they seem fine. But there's no growth, because there was no stretch. A capable 13-year-old who is asked to lead the same level of project they could already handle at 10 is being protected from the rep they need. The cost is invisible until you look up at 16 and realize they've never really had to make a hard call in front of other people. If your child finds every project easy and never expresses frustration, the projects are too light. Lean in. Push the next one a notch harder.

Overweighting: The over-challenged kid is the more visible mistake and, in some ways, the more damaging one. A project sized too far above a child's current ability fails publicly, with the team watching. They lose face. They internalize a story about not being a leader, when the real problem was that the rep was sized wrong. One badly oversized project can set a child back by months, because the next time you suggest a leadership rep, they remember the last one and refuse.

If you've overshot, own it. Tell them directly. "That one was on me. I asked you to lead something that was a stretch beyond where we are right now. The fact that it didn't go smoothly is about my sizing, not about your leading. Let's run a smaller one next time and work our way back up." That conversation, handled honestly, protects the long arc more than any apology you could offer.

The art of sizing

Sizing the weight is the most parental of the coaching skills in this book, in the sense that it's the one that depends most on your specific knowledge of your specific kid. No chart or program can do it for you. The teacher doesn't know your child the way you do. The coach doesn't know what last spring looked like. You do.

The three factors give you a frame. Age sets the rough starting point. Ability tells you what's already in the bank. Aptitude lets you know how fast and how high. When the three line up, sizing is

easy. When they diverge, it requires you to think. But that's your job, and nobody else can do it for you.

My dad never sat me down to explain why the tractor came before the truck, or why the field came before the road. He just sized each next thing about right, year after year, until the work was done. That's the move. Not a curriculum. Not a chart. Just an attentive adult, watching their child grow, adjusting the weight as the kid gets stronger.

Size the weight to the child you have. Each successful rep gets a little harder than the last. Each year a little less support. That's the craft.

Chapter 12

DIY Skills Development

Four Elements of a Real Leadership Rep

An experiment

Here's a small experiment. Picture two versions of the same Saturday morning. In the first version, your 10-year-old cleans her room because you've told her to. She does it alone, badly, and resents the whole exercise. You inspect, point out what she missed, and the rest of the morning is sour. She learned that cleaning is a punishment and that you're hard to please.

In the second version, you hand her something different. The storage room is a mess. You ask her to lead a small team (her younger brother, a neighbor friend, maybe you in a supporting role) to get it organized by lunch. She picks who's on the team. She decides what stays, what gets boxed, what gets tossed. There's a budget for a couple of bins from the store. If it goes well, the family

does pizza and a movie that night. If it doesn't, you'll figure out what to do with the half-finished mess together.

Same activity at the surface. Two completely different developmental events underneath. The first is a chore. The second is what this book has been calling a leadership rep, a structured chance for your child to practice the actual moves of leading other people toward a real goal, with real stakes, in a context safe enough to fail. The earlier chapters made the case that these reps are how The Five get built. This chapter is about how to build the reps themselves.

The power of repetition

Over a long teaching career I've met some remarkable people in the role of student. I say "in the role" on purpose, because whether they were undergrads at USC or Pepperdine or graduate students at the Naval Postgraduate School, I've usually come away learning from them as well.

One group of NASA engineers invited me to meet them at the command center in Houston. They showed me the giant pool where astronauts learn to operate in weightlessness by practicing underwater for hours. They explained a full-sized mockup of the International Space Station where crews run the same procedures over and over before they ever leave the ground. I've also had Navy SEALs as students and spent time with them in Coronado. Special Operators often invest weeks in what they call workups,

rehearsing mission tactics until the response is automatic, so that when the real operation comes, they can act fast and without hesitation. Despite Mookie's decade plus of playing pro ball, he has our son take him through regular workouts and then he does batting practice.

There's a reason the most demanding professions on earth are built around repetition. Neuroscientists have found that the brain lays down pathways to reinforce what we do, and repeated action turns those pathways into habitual patterns. Practice a behavior enough times and you have, quite literally, trained your brain to produce it. So, when we walk a young person through years of formal and informal chances to lead others in resourcefulness, responsibility, resilience, communication, and collaboration, we're not just giving them experience. We're building the neural wiring that lets them use The Five without having to think about it.

This also explains something parents often misread. The more reps a young person logs, the more familiar a situation feels, and a familiar situation feels comfortable. We tend to call that comfort confidence. Sometimes it is. More often it's something simpler: an ease that comes from recognizing the pattern. What looks like a bold preteen is frequently just a practiced one. Which is encouraging news, because familiarity is something you can build on purpose. You don't have to wait for a confident child. You can run the reps and let the confidence follow.

Why the kitchen table beats the classroom

DIY (do it yourself) represents a popular theme in the United States, where we avoid expensive professionals and enjoy the satisfaction of our own efforts, minus the high cost. So let's talk about DIY development of The Five. We've discussed why you as parent are the right trainer, but here's a quick word on why the home is the right place for this kind of work.

Three lines of research point the same direction. One comes from David Kolb, the educational theorist who in 1984 mapped out what he called the experiential learning cycle. Kolb's claim, which has held up across 40 years of follow-on research, is that real learning moves through four phases: a concrete experience, reflection on what happened, the formation of a new idea or principle, and then a test of that idea in a new situation. Skip any of the four and the learning stalls. Lecture a child about responsibility and you've handed them an abstract concept with nothing to attach it to. Let them lead a project, then talk through what worked, what didn't, and what they'd try next time, and you've run the full cycle.

A second comes from a 2014 meta-analysis published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Scott Freeman and colleagues at the University of Washington synthesized 225 studies of college science and engineering classrooms. Active learning, where students worked through problems rather than listening to a lecture, raised exam performance by nearly half a letter grade and dropped failure rates dramatically. The finding was

strong enough that the researchers raised the question of whether continuing to lecture in the face of the evidence should be considered educational malpractice. The principle scales down. Children and youth learn by doing, not by being told.

A third comes from a 2024 systematic review in the Journal of Family Theory & Review. Selman and colleagues looked at 18 studies on the effect of consistent family routines on children's executive function (the cluster of mental skills that includes self-control, planning, and working memory). Sixteen of the 18 showed a clear positive effect. Predictable family contexts, it turns out, are where the underlying machinery of capable behavior gets built.

Stack the three findings together and the case for home as the primary site of leadership development gets quietly strong. The home offers a steady context (routines), real activity rather than instruction (active learning), and a setting where the full Kolb cycle can run because the same adult is there for the doing, the reflecting, and the next attempt. No school can deliver that combination. No camp or program runs long enough. The home is structurally positioned to do this work better than any other environment your child will ever be in. Which is good news, because the home is also where you are.

What makes a project a real leadership rep

Not every activity counts. A chore isn't a leadership rep. A game isn't a leadership rep. Even a service project, done the wrong way

is not. The thing that turns an ordinary activity into a developmental event is the presence of four specific elements. Take any one away and the activity collapses back into busy work or into something the parent is essentially doing through the child.

1. A team of at least three

Leadership is, by definition, the practice of moving other people toward a shared goal. A kid working alone is doing a task. One working with one other person is collaborating. It's only when there are three or more people involved that they have to lead, which means assigning, coordinating, handling disagreement, and adjusting on the fly when a team member does something unexpected. Although in the field of organizational behavior a team is defined by two or more people. I have found that the best starting point is three if possible. If you can't find three, two can do, but three works best. As ability increases, you can move to four, five, and six team members.

The team doesn't have to be huge. The team can include you, a sibling, a cousin, a friend from the neighborhood, a grandparent, the kid down the street whose mom is fine with it. What matters is that your child is the one calling the shots, not just one of several hands on deck. This is the element parents skip most often, usually by accident. They give their kid a task that looks like leadership but is really solo work. Reorganizing the bookshelf alone is a task. Reorganizing the bookshelf with two other people, where your child decides who does what, is a rep.

2. A clear goal, with the process left open

The outcome should be defined. The path to it should not. "The storage room is organized and your siblings agree they could find their stuff in it" is a goal. "Do a good job" is not. "Raise \$50 for the animal shelter by Sunday afternoon" is a goal. "Help out somehow" is not.

The reason for the precision is that leaders make decisions about how to get from here to there. If the path is already specified, there are no decisions to make and your child is just executing your plan. If the destination is fuzzy, nobody can tell whether the project succeeded, including your child. A clear endpoint with an open middle is the shape of a real leadership problem. Resist the urge to draw the map. The map is the part your child is supposed to draw. Your job is to draw the destination.

3. Real resources and risks

This is the element that separates a leadership rep from a pretend exercise. A leader has something to spend (time, money, materials, other people's effort) and the possibility of using it badly. Without resources and risk, there are no consequential decisions, and without consequential decisions, no leadership.

Resources can be small. Twenty dollars to buy supplies. Three hours on Saturday morning. Two helpers who could be deployed in different ways. The risk can also be small. Maybe the lemonade stand doesn't make money. Maybe the room organization plan

turns out worse than what was there before. Maybe the family game your child designed is boring on the first playthrough.

Small consequences are fine. The point isn't to put real money or relationships in danger. It's for your kid to feel the weight of a decision before they make it, and to feel the result of the decision after. That weight is what trains judgment. A simulation without it trains nothing.

Two cautions here. First, don't rescue. The instinct will be powerful. If your child is heading toward a predictable small failure, let it happen, as long as nobody gets hurt. The failure is the point. Second, don't punish. The risk should be in the project, not in your reaction to the project. If your child runs the budget poorly, the consequence is that the budget got run poorly, not that you're disappointed in them.

4. A debrief that turns the experience into learning

This is the element few talk about and most skip. It's also where most of the learning happens.

Kolb's research is clear on this. The concrete experience alone teaches little. The reflection on the experience deepens learning significantly. A preteen who runs a project and then moves on to the next thing has had an experience. One who runs a project and then sits down for five minutes to talk about what happened has built a piece of capacity that will show up the next time.

The debrief doesn't have to be long or formal. A conversation at dinner the same night is fine. A walk afterward works. Five questions, asked in a neutral tone of voice, cover most of it:

- What did you like and not like about being the leader?
- What worked well and what didn't?
- Who did well on your team, and who struggled?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What did you learn about yourself?

Then go deeper on whichever answer seemed most interesting.

"Tell me more about that." "Help me understand what you mean."

"Can you give me an example?" These three phrases will get you further than stopping at the first response. Go deeper. Don't stop at shallow.

A note on tone. The debrief is not an evaluation. You are not grading the project. You are helping your child build a habit of looking honestly at their own performance and pulling lessons out of it, which is one of the most valuable capacities any human being ever develops. If the debrief feels like a performance review, your child will dread the next project. If it feels like an interesting conversation between someone who did something hard and someone who's curious about how it went, they will be ready to do another one next weekend.

Four projects to start with

Here are four projects that have all four elements built in. They aren't the only options. They illustrate ones that are hard to mess up, and once you've run two or three of them you'll start inventing your own.

Project one: The room makeover

Your kid is in charge of organizing a defined space (a storage room, the garage, the playroom, their own bedroom) with a team of at least two other people. They pick the team, decide what stays and what goes, and have a small budget for supplies. The deadline is sometime that weekend. The reward, if they pull it off to your satisfaction, is something they want.

Why it works: the goal is concrete and visible, the resources are real (a budget, helpers, time), and the risk is also visible (a half-organized room is a worse problem than the one you started with). The debrief should focus more on the process than the outcome, because that is what's most transferable.

Project two: The day-off trip

Your child plans and leads a family outing. You set the constraints (budget, total time, distance limit, anyone who has to be back by a certain hour) and then hand over the rest. Destination, transportation, what gets brought, who does what. They lead the planning conversation and they lead the day.

Why it works: the constraints are real (you didn't promise unlimited money or unlimited time), the team is intrinsic (the family is going as a unit), and there are decisions to make at every step. The debrief on the drive home is some of the best leadership coaching you'll ever do, because every choice that worked and every one that didn't is fresh in everyone's mind.

Project three: Good Deed Day

Your child leads a small team in doing something useful for someone else in the neighborhood. Cleaning up a vacant lot. Baking cookies and delivering them to neighbors. Making cards for residents at a nearby senior facility. They pick the deed, recruit the team, organize the supplies, and run the day.

Why it works: the goal is concrete (the lot is clean or it isn't, the cookies got delivered or they didn't), the team is real, and the risk is mostly social (what if nobody wants the cookies?), which is exactly the kind of risk young leaders need reps with. The debrief naturally extends past performance and into what it felt like to help, which builds a different muscle than the room makeover does.

Project four: The event or mini business

This is the bigger one. Your child starts a small venture (a lemonade stand, a garage sale, charity fundraiser, or other special event) with a couple of partners. They develop the strategy, recruit, promote, handle the money and deal with customers. If profit is involved, they split the profits or losses.

Our middle son did this as a teenager. He called his company Bro Mow, hired his younger brother, and recruited his mom as needed. The brothers walked the neighborhood passing out flyers for lawn mowing. In the winter it became a snow-shoveling business. By the end, they were also picking up mail and walking dogs for neighbors on vacation. They made real money. They also had real conflicts (the younger brother wanted the same pay as the older one, which led to some of the more useful conversations about economics they ever had). The whole thing was an extended leadership rep that ran for two years and still gets discussed in family gatherings (mostly because Jesse didn't think the pay was equitable; another life issue).

Why it works: every element is dialed up. Real team, real goal, real money on the line, and a debrief that happens continuously as the event or business runs. A child who runs a small business for a summer has done more developmental work than most adults do in a decade.

When to start, what to expect

You can start running these projects with children as young as five, scaled appropriately. A 5-year-old can lead a two-person team in setting the table for dinner with a clear standard for what "set" means. An 8-year-old can run the room makeover. A 10-year-old can plan the day-off trip. A 12-year-old can run Good Deed Day. A 14-year-old can launch the mini-business.

The first few projects may be rocky. That's the point. Your child is doing something hard, probably for the first time, and they will make decisions you wouldn't have made and run into problems you saw coming. Some of those will produce small failures. Let them. These are part of the curriculum.

Don't expect the early projects to look successful from the outside. The room will be organized awkwardly. The day-off trip will hit a snag. The lemonade stand will sell three cups. None of that matters. What counts is that your child stood inside a decision, made it, lived with the result, and talked it through afterward with someone who took them seriously.

The opportunity is already there

Most of the materials for this work are already in your house. The team is living with you, or two doors down. The goals often exist on your to-do list. The resources live in the budget. The risks are small enough to absorb. The only thing missing is the framework that turns ordinary household activity into deliberate developmental work, and you now have it.

It's worth naming the payoff directly, because it arrives sooner than most parents expect. This isn't only an investment in the adult your child will become. A home where children and teens carry real weight, and do it willingly, is a calmer home to live in now. Fewer meltdowns. Less standoffs over who does what. More young people who can be handed something and trusted with it. You

don't just see the return decades later. You start collecting it while your kids are still down the hall. Those who see the results of your efforts will be in awe, without knowing the secret sauce you're discovering in this book.

The four elements again: A team of at least three. A clear goal with the process left open. Real resources and real risk. A debrief that turns the experience into learning.

Pick a project this week. Make it a small one. Run it with the four elements in mind. Sit down afterward and ask the five questions. Then pick another one for next week. The reps compound faster than you'd think.

The opportunity for leadership training is already sitting inside your ordinary week. The framework in this chapter is how you see it.

- For more ideas and free articles, go to www.LeadYoungTraining.com as well as Dr. Nelson's YouTube channel: @kidleadacademy .

Chapter 13

Coaching Cues

What to Do While the Rep Is Happening

Asking vs. Telling

Chapter 11 was about setting up the rep (repetition). This chapter is about what happens during it, and in the five minutes right after.

If the project is the curriculum, the coaching is the teaching. And the hard truth is that most parents, even the ones who get the project design exactly right, blow the coaching part. Not because they don't care. Because the instincts that make us good parents in most situations are the wrong instincts here. The urge to step in, fix, explain, and give a quick verdict so we can all move on with our day. Each of those instincts, deployed in the middle of a leadership rep, shrinks the rep down to nothing.

Good coaching is mostly the discipline of not doing what comes naturally. The good news is that there's a small set of moves that, once you have them, change everything. Three of them, really. Ask instead of tell. Coach the leader, not the team. And give feedback in a shape your child can use.

Move one: ask, don't tell

Here are two ways the same moment can go.

Your 11-year-old is leading the room makeover from Chapter 11. Halfway through, the team is bickering about whether the old toys should go to donation or storage. Your daughter looks stuck. Version one: you walk in and say, "Just put them in the donation pile. You haven't played with those in two years." Problem solved. The work continues. Three minutes saved.

Version two: you walk over and ask, "What's the disagreement?" She tells you. You ask, "What are the options you're thinking about?" She lists two. You ask, "What would help you decide between them?" She thinks for a second, then says she'll ask her brother which toys he still cares about. The work continues. Maybe four minutes spent.

In version one, you solved the problem. In version two, your daughter solved the problem and built a slightly stronger ability to solve the next one. One-minute differences like this will result in what gets installed.

This is the Socratic move, and it's the single most important coaching skill in this chapter. The name isn't accidental. I'm writing this in a Starbucks in Athens, a few steps from where Socrates spent 40 years showing his fellow citizens that a well-aimed question teaches more than a confident answer ever does, and that the quality of the question is the quality of the lesson.

Educational researcher Alison King made the case in a now-widely-cited 1994 paper that structured questioning consistently produces deeper learning than direct instruction. Decades of follow-up research has held up the finding across subjects, ages, and contexts. The instructor who asks well-aimed questions teaches more than the instructor who explains, every time.

Two numbers worth keeping in your head while you coach. The first is 75. Roughly three-quarters of your coaching, by volume, should be questions, not statements. If you find yourself in lecture mode, you've slipped into the wrong gear. The second is 25. You should hear your own voice no more than a quarter of the time during a coaching moment. If you're doing more than that, your child isn't leading. You are. These aren't precise numbers to track. They're a felt sense to calibrate against. When the coaching is working, the child is talking more than you are. When you're talking more, something has gone sideways and you need to shut up.

Good questions and what makes them that way

Not every question is a coaching question. A question that has a single right answer in the parent's head, with a tone that implies the child is supposed to guess it, is a quiz. Quizzes feel terrible to the youth on the receiving end, and they teach nothing except how to read the parent's face. Real coaching questions are open, curious, and genuinely interested in whatever the answer turns out to be.

A few that work in almost any situation:

- What's the goal here?
- What are the options you're considering?
- What's the part you're stuck on?
- What would happen if you tried that?
- What do you think the team needs from you right now?
- If you were watching another child (pre-teen, teen) do this, what would you tell them?

That last one is gold. It pulls your kid out of the heat of the moment and lets them think about the problem with a little distance. Try it sometime when nothing else is working.

Questions to avoid

Some question shapes look like coaching but aren't. They sneak telling in through the back door, and kids hear them as criticism dressed up in a question mark.

- *Yes-or-no questions.* "Do you think you could do better?" is a closed loop. It produces a one-word answer and no thinking. Convert to open: "What are some ways the next round could go better?"
- *Rhetorical questions.* "How many times do I have to tell you?" is not a question. It's frustration wearing a question mark. Kids know the difference instantly, and the trust costs are real.

- *Leading questions with a clear right answer.* "Don't you think it would be smarter to ask your sister to help instead?" is a statement disguised as a question. The disguised version is worse than the direct one because it pretends to invite thinking while shutting it down.

Move two: coach the leader, not the team

Here's a trap. Your child is leading the project, but during the activity you find yourself talking to the whole team. You're directing the helpers. You're refereeing the disagreement between two of the kids. You're answering questions the team members ask. You feel productive. The activity is moving forward. And your child, who is supposed to be the leader, is standing off to the side, watching you lead. The rep just ended. They're now an observer in their own project.

The corrective is simple and a little uncomfortable. Your job during the activity is to coach the leader. Period. If a team member asks you a question, your answer is, "Good question. Ask the leader." If two helpers are bickering, your move isn't to settle it. It's to catch the leader's eye and say, "There's something for you to handle over there." If something is going wrong with the team dynamics, you don't fix it. You whisper to your kid that there's a dynamic worth noticing, and let them try to address it.

This is the move that most parents find hardest, because it requires you to watch suboptimal things happen and not intervene. The

room is being organized in the wrong order. The cookies are going to come out lopsided. Two of the helpers are slacking and the leader hasn't noticed yet. Your hands twitch. You want to step in. Don't. Whisper to the leader. Ask them a question. Then step back and let them try.

The coaching whisper

There's a small mechanic from the LeadYoung training tradition worth borrowing. It's a short, private coaching aside, delivered to the leader only, in the middle of the activity. Maybe 10 or 15 seconds, off to the side, where the team can't hear.

It might sound like: "Hey, quick thing. I notice your brother isn't doing much. What do you want to do about that?" Or: "You've got about 10 minutes left and the supplies are still in three different rooms. What's the plan?" Or: "I think Sara has an idea she hasn't said yet. Worth asking her?"

The whisper does three things at once. It gives the leader a coaching nudge without undermining them in front of the team. It treats them as the real decision-maker, the question is always "what do you want to do," never "here's what you should do." And it builds the habit of pausing to think about the team mid-activity, which is one of the harder leadership muscles to develop and one of the most useful. Use it sparingly. Two or three whispers every few minutes will usually suffice. More than that and you've slipped back into running the show.

Move three: Good, Better, Best

The activity ends. The team disperses. You pull your child aside for one or two minutes of one-on-one. This is the highest-leverage coaching moment of the entire project. It's also where most parents say something useless.

The useless versions tend to fall into two camps. The first is the wave-off: "Good job, sweetie." Says nothing, teaches nothing, and your kid knows it. The second is the postmortem: "Okay, here's what you should have done differently..." Now it's a critique. Now they're defensive. Now the lesson lands as judgment, not learning.

There's a better shape, and it has nearly two decades of feedback research behind it. Educational researchers John Hattie and Helen Timperley, in their 2007 paper "The Power of Feedback" (one of the most-cited papers in education in recent decades), looked at hundreds of studies and pulled out three things feedback has to do to work. It has to tell the learner where they are. It has to tell them where they're going. And it has to point them toward what to try next. Feedback that does all three is powerful.

The LeadYoung tradition has a folksy, easy-to-remember version of this same structure. It's called Good, Better, Best, and it's a three-part sandwich:

- *Good.* One specific thing your child did well. "I noticed how you stopped to ask your brother what he wanted to keep before you packed up his stuff. That was a real leader move."

- *Better*. One specific thing they could try next time, framed as a forward-looking suggestion, not a backward-looking critique.
"One thing to think about for next time: when Sara stopped working, you waited about five minutes before saying anything. What if you'd checked in with her sooner?"
- *Best*. One specific thing they did best, named clearly, ending on a high note. "What I liked best was when the disagreement broke out and you stopped to listen to both sides before deciding. That's hard for adults to do. You did it."

Two bread slices of affirmation, one piece of forward-looking adjustment in the middle. The sandwich shape matters. The *Better* lands cleanly because it's bracketed by genuine recognition, and your kid leaves the conversation feeling seen, stretched, and motivated to do it again.

Three things that make the sandwich work

Be specific. "Good job leading" is air. "I noticed how you stopped to ask your brother before packing up" is a coaching moment. Generic praise doesn't teach because it doesn't tell the kid what to repeat. Specific praise points at the behavior worth doing again.

Aim forward, not backward. The *Better* is about next time, not last time. "What if you'd checked in with her sooner" is forward-facing. "You should have checked in with her sooner" is a verdict on something that's already over and can't be changed. The first invites thinking. The second invites defensiveness. Hattie and Timperley call this distinction the difference between feedback and feed-forward. Feed-forward wins, almost every time.

Keep it short. Three sentences, one for each part. Maybe four. If your sandwich runs to a paragraph each, you've stopped coaching and started lecturing. The whole exchange should take 90 seconds. Long enough to land. Short enough to honor that your child just did something hard and may be ready for a snack.

The mistakes parents make most often

Even with the three moves in hand, the same handful of mistakes show up over and over. Worth naming them, because once you can see them coming, you can catch yourself before you do them.

- *Hijacking.* The single most common mistake. The activity is going slowly, or sideways, and you can't help yourself. You step in and lead. We call that hijacking. The rep ends in that moment, whether you realize it or not.
- *Talking too much.* Already covered, but worth repeating because almost everyone does it. Watch the 75 / 25 ratio. If you're talking more than your kid, you're doing the work they're supposed to be doing.
- *Coaching the wrong person.* You start coaching the team members instead of the leader. Now you're running a group project with your kid as a participant. Coach the leader. Let the leader handle the team.
- *Getting caught up in the outcome.* The lemonade stand isn't making money and you start optimizing the signage. The room

is being organized inefficiently and you start moving boxes. The point isn't the lemonade or the room. The point is the rep. Let the outcome be whatever it ends up being.

- *Skipping the Good, Better, Best.* The activity ends, everyone scatters, and the coaching moment passes uncoached. The reflection conversation we covered in Chapter 11 is still coming at dinner or on the drive home, but the in-the-moment feedback (the two-minute aside right after the project ends) is its own thing, and it's the place where the most precise coaching happens. Don't skip it.

Putting the three moves together

Picture an hour-long project. Here's roughly what your coaching looks like across it.

In the first few minutes, you might ask one or two setup questions to make sure your kid knows what they're aiming for. "What's the goal? What's your first move?" Then you step back.

For most of the next 45 minutes, you watch. You don't direct. You don't fix. If a team member asks you something, you redirect to the leader. You let suboptimal things happen. Maybe twice, maybe three times, you pull your kid aside for a 15-second whisper: "Quick thing. What about Sara?" Then you let them handle it.

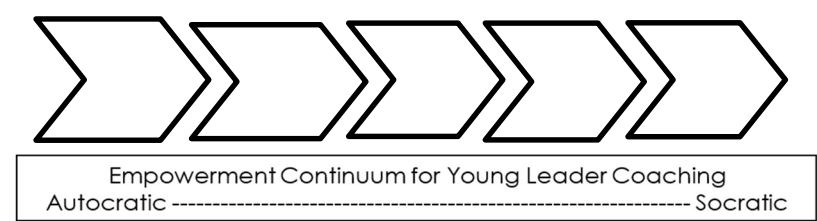
When the activity ends, you pull your child aside and run the Good, Better, Best. Sixty seconds. Specific, forward-looking, ending on something they did well.

Later that day, or the next day, you run the longer debrief from Chapter 11. The five questions. The Tell-Me-More follow-ups. The conversation that turns the rep into a piece of usable wisdom your kid can pull from next time.

That's the whole sequence. A few setup questions, mostly silence with occasional whispers, a short feedback sandwich, and a longer debrief. None of it is hard. All of it requires a kind of self-discipline most parents have to build deliberately, because the natural instinct in every one of these moments is to do something more active. The whole skill is in doing less.

Your coaching should grow too

There's one more move worth naming before we close, because it's the one most parents (and most coaches) skip entirely. As your child grows in ability, your coaching has to grow with them. The same coaching style that worked beautifully when she was eight will hold her back at 13, and the style that fits a confident 13-year-old would have crushed an 8-year-old still finding her footing.



The LeadYoung curricula model that we use in training maps this out as a five-step empowerment continuum, anchored at one end by *autocratic* and at the other by *Socratic*. It's a useful frame because it gives you a concrete language for where you are right now and where you're trying to get to.

- *Level 1, Tell.* You direct the child step by step. "Pick up that toy. Put it in the bin. Now grab the next one." Used with very young or very new leaders.
- *Level 2, Tell Plus.* You direct, but you also give the child real authority over a piece of it. "I want the room organized by lunch. You decide who's on the team."
- *Level 3, Sell.* You and the child brainstorm together, and then you suggest the path forward. "What are some ways we could approach this? Okay, here's what I'd recommend."
- *Level 4, Sell and Delegate.* You suggest some of it and hand the rest off. The child is doing real thinking, not just executing.
- *Level 5, Delegate with Socratic cues.* The child leads. You ask questions. The questions are the whole coaching. This is where we want to get to, and it's where most of the chapter so far has been pointed.

The counterintuitive move, and the one most parents miss, is this: start at the right (Level 5) and only move left as needed. Hand the child as much ownership as you think they can handle, then dial back the empowerment only if it becomes clear the rep is collapsing. As they succeed, move right again. Eventually, for any

given category of project, you settle on the level that stretches without overwhelming.

The reason for starting at the right is the same reason we don't keep training wheels on the bicycle longer than needed. Once a child can hold their balance, leaving the training wheels on actively teaches them that they need help they don't really need. The coaching equivalent is staying at Level 2 when your kid is ready for Level 4. They notice. It tells them you don't trust them yet, which becomes a self-fulfilling story.

Now the harder warning. As your kid genuinely gets better at leading, the temptation will be to coast. They've got it. You can step back and let them run. Don't.

Good leaders need better coaching, not less of it. The high-aptitude kid who's nailed her first six projects doesn't need you to disappear. She needs you to start asking harder questions. *What were you thinking when you decided to do it that way? How do you think it went? How else could you have done that? What would you try if you ran this with twice the team?* The questions stretch into the next layer, the layer she can't yet reach on her own. That's where the next round of growth lives.

The same principle Chapter 10 made about sizing the kid's reps applies to sizing your coaching. Each round, a little less direction. Each round, slightly harder questions. The coaching stays in the zone of proximal development right alongside the kid, never far

enough behind to bore her and never far enough ahead to overwhelm her. That's the long game. It's what separates a parent who runs leadership reps for a season from a parent who develops a leader across a decade.

The leadership rep is your child's. Your job is to coach the leader, not to lead the project. Ask more than you tell, talk less than they do, and end with a sandwich they can digest.

Chapter 14

What's Next

Four Ways to Get Going

You've reached the part of the book where things get practical. Time to figure out what to actually do on Monday. Most parenting books end here and lose their reader, not because they didn't care. The gap between reading and doing is wide, and books don't help much in crossing it. So this chapter is going to be short and concrete, built around four ways to apply what you've learned. Pick one. Pick two. Pick all four. Start where the energy is, not where you think you're supposed to begin.

One. Have the family conversation

Smallest step, most important one. Take it first, whatever else you decide to do. Sit down with your partner, if you have one, and with the kids. Tell them what you've been reading. You don't need a speech. Something like, "I've been reading a book about how young people learn to handle things in life, and one of the main

ideas is that you learn by leading actual stuff, not by being told about it. I want to try some of this with you and see what happens."

Then talk about what your first project might be. Use the four elements from Chapter 11 as a loose frame. Pick something concrete. The room makeover. A weekend outing your daughter plans. A small Good Deed Day in the neighborhood. Pick a date, who's on the team, then hand it over.

Starting with conversation, instead of just announcing a project, signals that you're shifting the family culture rather than running a one-off exercise. The kids should know what you're doing and why. They should know this isn't a phase, and they have a voice in shaping it. Young people who feel like the framework is happening to them tend to resist it. If they perceive they're inside the framework tend to engage with it. If you have several kids at different ages, talk through what an early rep might look like for each of them. The 5-year-old leads something small, the 12-year-old something bigger. Both are inside the same family project of learning to lead, just at different levels.

Two. Find another family or two

Almost everything in life is easier with company. Leadership development for kids is no exception. You build momentum through a coalition. Look around at the families you already know. The ones from school, neighborhood, faith community, and your

kid's sports team. Find one or two where the parents seem to be thinking along similar lines. You don't need a big group. Two or three families is plenty. More than that and the logistics get hard.

Then propose a few low-friction options:

- Read this book together. A chapter every couple of weeks, then meet for coffee or over dinner to compare notes. The parent conversation alone is worth the price of admission.
- Organize joint kid activities where the children take turns leading. Five kids and three parents in someone's backyard, running a project together, with the adults practicing the coaching moves from Chapter 12 on each other's kids. Rotate the leader each time.
- Set up a regular rhythm. Once a month, every six weeks, or whatever works. Small and repeatable beats ambitious and short-lived.

The benefits of a small coalition stack up fast. Your child sees other young people leading and gets ideas. You see other parents coaching and pick up moves you wouldn't have invented on your own. Your daughter's social circle starts to include other kids who are practicing the same skills, which means leadership behavior becomes normal rather than weird. And on the weeks when you're tired and not feeling it, the standing commitment to other families pulls you through.

Coaching also gets easier in a counter-intuitive way. Coaching your own kid is hard because the relational stakes are high. Coaching

someone else's is easier in the moment because the relationship has more slack. As you practice on the neighbor's 12-year-old, you build skills you bring back home.

Three. Talk to the other adults in your child's life

Chapter 9 made the case that you're the general contractor, and the teachers, coaches, youth pastors, and other specialists are partners doing real work that isn't yours to do. This is the chapter where you talk to them.

Pick one or two adults who already spend regular time with your child. The teacher who knows them well. The coach who's been on their case in a productive way. The youth pastor who sees a side of them you don't see at home. Have a short conversation. Tell them what you're working on and why. Ask where they see your child stretching themselves, and where they see them hanging back. Ask whether they could create a small leadership opportunity inside what they're already doing. A class project, leading the warmup, running a small group during the lesson.

Most teachers and coaches are caught a little off guard when a parent shows up wanting to talk about something other than grades or playing time. The conversations tend to land warmly. You'll often find that the adult had instincts in this direction already and was just waiting for a parent who shared them. You don't need to do this with every adult in your child's orbit. Pick the two or

three who matter most and start there. The vision expands one conversation at a time.

Four. Take the course

If you want a structured path that goes deeper than this book, KidLead Academy is the online course that does that work (www.BestParentCourse.com). Some context. The material in this book is a distillation. The training I've been doing with adults around the world for over two decades, with parents, teachers, youth ministry leaders, corporate trainers, and educators in a dozen countries, is more detailed and more structured than any single book can be. KidLead Academy is that full training, translated for parents and delivered online so you can take it at your own pace.

What's in it:

- Over seven hours of video instruction plus a downloadable handbook, covering the one skill you need to develop The Five in your child.
- Walkthroughs of how to run leadership reps at every age level from 5 to 15, with specific activity scripts and coaching demonstrations.
- Guidance on using the LeadYoung curricula, the age-and-stage training materials we use in the in-person KidLead training programs, available on Amazon and built to be used at home, in small groups, or in classrooms.

- The same Socratic coaching training we give to our in-person trainers, broken into modules you can take one at a time.
- Plus you receive a copy of the book *My Kid Leads!* along with its 44 podcasts.

It's the course version of everything I'd say to you in person if we had a year together. The book gives you the principles, but the course gives you practice. The worked examples, activity progressions, language for the coaching moments, and troubleshooting for when things go sideways. The course is for the parent who wants to take this seriously enough that they'd rather not figure it all out from scratch, given what we've learned over the past 20 years.

If that's you, the website is www.BestParentCourse.com. You can also take a free leadership assessment on your child, download an eBook titled *Raising Leaders*, and find many other articles at www.LeadYoungTraining.com. Reach out to the author if you'd like to bring this training to your organization or network.

One final word about starting

Whichever of the four paths you take, you can take them in any combination, order, and pace. What matters is that you start. Not perfectly or after you've read another book, done more research, or waited until your schedule clears up.

Start small. Begin this week if you can. Run one rep. See what happens. Run another. The first few will be rocky and that's the

point. The framework you now have is enough to begin with, and the only way to develop your judgment as a coach is to actually coach. Your kids don't need a perfect parent doing this perfectly. They need an attentive parent doing this consistently. The bar is much lower than you think. The impact across a decade is much higher than you can imagine.

Pick a path and a project. The portal is open for now.

Don't miss it.

Chapter 15

The Long View

No Nearsighted Parenting

Aristotle says

I wrote a good chunk of this book on the trip Nancy and I took through France, Italy, and Greece, the one I mentioned in Part I. Yesterday we walked up the Acropolis. The day was warm, the marble was bright, and the wind moved through the columns of the Parthenon the way it has for 24 centuries. We made our way down to the new museum at the foot of the hill, and somewhere in the middle of it, in the section devoted to the philosophers, I stood in front of a panel about Socrates, Plato, and his student, Aristotle.

Aristotle had a word that I've been circling for the entire length of this book without naming it directly. *Eudaimonia*. Most translations call it *happiness*, which is wrong, or at least misleading. The word he meant is one English doesn't quite have. The full and proper unfolding of a human being according to what they were made to

become. The flourishing of a life across the whole arc of living, not just the parts that happen to be visible right now.

I stood there in the museum thinking about my own three sons, our two granddaughters, the thousands of young people I've worked with in various countries across two decades. I thought about the parents I've spent my career talking to and those I'm speaking to now, in this book. And I realized the word I've been chasing all along is the one mentioned by a Greek teacher, 2,400 years before any of us got here. So before I let you go, I want to describe it.

Thrive and flourish

The book's subtitle says *Thrive*. I chose the word on purpose. *Thrive* is achievement-coded. In American usage it points at visible success. The company is thriving. The kid is thriving at school. The marriage is thriving. It implies vigor, momentum, things working. It's the right word for a book pitched to parents because it meets them where they live. We want our children to do well in ways that show, and there's no shame in wanting it. Thrive is present-tense and observable. You can read it on a report card.

Flourish is the other word. The one Aristotle was reaching for. It comes from the Latin *florere*, to *bloom*. The image isn't a sprinter winning a race. It's a tree, rooted and slowly maturing, putting out what it was made to put out in its proper season. Positive psychology revived the word in our generation. Martin Seligman's

PERMA framework. Corey Keyes's research distinguishing flourishing from languishing as the two ends of mental wellbeing.¹

Keyes's population studies have found that only about one in five American adults meet the empirical criteria for flourishing. The other four sit somewhere between coping and quietly languishing, and the numbers haven't improved in recent decades.

Thriving is the season. Flourishing is the lifetime. A young person can thrive without flourishing: the straight-A student, the varsity team, the college acceptance, and an internal collapse that nobody saw coming. A young person can flourish through a season that doesn't look like thriving: the failed grade, the lost team, the deepening character that won't show up on any transcript for 15 years. Most of the time the two travel together. When they come apart, flourish is the one that matters in the end.

Thrive describes what's coming off the tree this year. Flourish describes what the tree is becoming. Thrive gets read by observers. Flourish gets read in the long mirror. Thrive rewards the visible win. Flourish rewards the next forty years. The American achievement frame favors *thrive* because thrive is countable. The older wisdom traditions, the Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, the Hebrew *shalom*, the Christian language of abundant life, the Islamic *falah*, the Confucian *ren*, all point at something closer to *flourish*. Rightly ordered. Deeply formed. Mature in its time.

Here's the part most parents don't hear often enough. Optimizing for thrive can quietly undermine flourish. The seemingly thriving teenager with the perfect résumé and the hollow interior is the cautionary case, and most of us know one as an adult. The life looks enviable from a distance and feels empty up close.

Optimizing for flourish, by contrast, tends to produce thriving as a byproduct, because the underlying capacities show up in the visible life anyway. Aim for thrive and you might miss flourish. Aim for flourish and you usually get both. The Five we've been mapping through this book are aimed at flourishing first. Thriving is the byproduct. The deeper work is the long unfolding.

Too Little

I spent the first 13 years of my life on a rural farm in Iowa. As a preteen I joined 4-H, a youth organization popular in agricultural communities, and recited a pledge at meetings that went like this: *I pledge my Head to clearer thinking, my Heart to greater loyalty, my Hands to larger service, and my Health to better living, for my club, my community, my country, and my world.* Many 4-H members raise livestock to show at county and state fairs. When I was around 12, my show animal was a female hog named Too Little.

On our farm we raised beef cattle and hogs along with corn and alfalfa. Our 30-some sows farrowed twice a year, each producing a litter of 10 to 12 piglets. Occasionally a litter had a runt, one of the pigs obviously smaller than the others and lacking the ability to thrive. The runt's condition usually worsened in the first few days,

when the litter sorted out a pecking order at the sow's teats. She had 10 or 12, roughly one per piglet, but the stronger babies claimed the best ones and the weaker ones got what was left. Survival of the fittest, settled in the first 48 hours. The piglets already behind tended to stay behind.

The year I was old enough to show a hog, Dad offered me one of the runts. I'd like to say it was to challenge me, to see if I could rise to the occasion. Honestly, it was probably because we didn't have much money and he couldn't afford to give me a healthy pig that would bring more at market. Either way, I took her. I named her Too Little, because there was no real chance she'd ever become a show animal.

Over the next six months I gave her special feed Dad showed me how to mix. I washed her, petted her, played with her, talked to her. She started gaining. Slowly at first, then more steadily, until she caught up with her littermates, who had been weaned and were already out in the barnyard on their own. When the time came to decide whether to take her to the fair, Dad said, "I think she's good enough to show." That settled it. I started training her to walk around the pen with my voice and a small plywood board to nudge her shoulder for direction. Too Little and I made the trip to the Adair County Fair, where she earned a red ribbon. Second place.

What happened next is what I've never forgotten. The county fair ran a program where show pigs could be sold to buyers and the

carcasses graded for quality, the marbling, the meat-to-fat ratio, the overall yield. A few weeks after the fair, an envelope came in the mail. Too Little had received one of the top final gradings in the whole state. The runt nobody thought would amount to anything had grown into one of the best.

I've thought about that pig a lot in the 50-some years since. Not because she made me proud, though she did. Because of what she taught a 12-year-old farm kid about what a young creature can become when someone decides to invest in them past the point where the data justified it.

If you're raising a Too Little, you probably sense it. Maybe your child is a little behind physically, or socially, or academically. Maybe they've been treated as the runt of some metaphorical litter, a classroom, a sports team, a friend group, a family. Maybe the data don't justify the investment they're asking from you, and you've been told, gently or otherwise, that you should adjust your expectations.

Don't. Or rather, adjust them in the other direction. With consistent care, real food in the form of attention, and a deliberate plan to build The Five we've been talking about, the young person who started behind can close the gap and sometimes pass the ones who started ahead. The grading report doesn't come back in a year. It comes back in a decade. And the kid who was last in line at the teat at six weeks can be the one whose adult life is quietly remarkable at 30.

If your child isn't a Too Little, all the better. They're not starting at a deficit. But don't assume the lead they have now is the lead they'll keep. Plenty of front-row piglets coast on their position and end up middling at market. The investment matters as much for the well-positioned child as for the runt. Maybe more, because the well-positioned child is the one whose deficit is most easily missed.

The long view

A study has been running at Harvard for more than 85 years, the longest of its kind ever conducted. It started in 1938 with a cohort of young men and has followed them, along with their wives and children, into their nineties. The researchers wanted to know what produces a flourishing adult life. The headline finding everyone repeats is that the strongest predictor of late-life flourishing is the quality of a person's relationships. Not income. Not professional achievement. Not health behaviors. Relationships.²

But the finding underneath that one, the one I think you should hear at the end of this book, is that the men who flourished in their 70s and 80s had developed certain capacities by their 20s. They could handle adversity without collapsing. They knew how to maintain relationships through friction. They kept growing and changing when life required it. They took responsibility for their own contribution to a difficult situation rather than blaming the situation. They communicated across the long arc of a marriage and a career. And they collaborated, with a spouse, with

colleagues, with the unexpected children life sometimes hands a person.

Those capacities map almost exactly onto The Five this book has been about. The Harvard study is the empirical version of what we've been arguing, and it's a study of *flourishing* specifically, not thriving. The men whose adult lives flourished had The Five installed before they were grown. The men whose adult lives didn't flourish, in many cases, were missing one or more, and the missing piece traced back, in the data, to a stretch of childhood that nobody invested in installing it.

What we've been calling The Five isn't a parenting fad. It's the developmental signature of an adult life that holds together across decades. The years for installing them are the years your child is in right now.

The work that's yours

Most of this book has been about what your child needs and how you can deliver it. Let me close by saying something about you. You've read 15 chapters of an argument that puts a particular weight on your shoulders, and I want to be honest with you about what that is and what it isn't.

It isn't the weight of getting it right every day. You won't. None of us do. The reps will be uneven. Some weeks you'll coach beautifully. Other weeks you'll be tired and miss the moment that

mattered. The work doesn't require perfection. It requires presence and persistence across the decade in front of you.

It isn't the weight of producing a particular outcome, either. Your child is their own person. They will do with their life what they choose to do with it. Some of what they become won't look the way you imagined. Some will look better than you imagined. Either way, your job isn't to author their adulthood. It's to give them the capacities to author their own. What it is, is the weight of having been entrusted with the years that matter most. The portal is open. The ingredients are available. The position is yours. No other adult in your child's life can do this particular work. You can.

Most parenting books end with a summary. This one ends with a sending. You don't finish this book. You begin from it. Go feed your Too Little, or your front-row piglet, or the child you have who isn't either one and is just your kid. Set up the small leadership reps. Coach the moments. Stay close enough to catch what matters. Trust the slow work. The grading report doesn't come back for a decade. Then it does, and you find out you grew one of the good ones, the kind of person whose life flourishes, not just for a season, but likely a lifetime.

Aim for flourish — and get both.

Notes

1. Corey L. M. Keyes, "The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 43, no. 2 (2002): 207–222. Keyes's research has consistently found that roughly 20 percent of US adults meet the empirical criteria for flourishing, with most of the remainder either moderately mentally healthy or languishing. See also Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011), for the PERMA framework (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment).

2. The Harvard Study of Adult Development, originally launched in 1938, is now in its eighty-fifth year and remains one of the longest longitudinal studies of adult life ever conducted. For the most accessible synthesis of findings, see Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023). For the earlier landmark work on adult development from the same study, see George E. Vaillant, *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alan E. Nelson is a leader, professor, and social entrepreneur. Most of his life he's led. After earning a doctorate in leadership from the University of San Diego, he began writing and teaching other leaders. Then at midlife he changed gears, focusing on identifying and developing leaders while they're most pliable, between the ages of 3 and 18. He's the founder of KidLead Academy, an online course for parents

to develop their child's leadership potential (BestParentCourse.com) and LeadYoung Training Systems, making an impact internationally.

Alan has taught leadership, organizational behavior, and human capital performance and motivation courses at USC Marshall School of Business, Pepperdine, and the University of California Irvine's Merage School of Business. Since 2010, he's taught at the Naval Postgraduate School. His students have included NASA engineers, Navy SEALs, Top Gun pilots, and international officers. He's the author of over 40 books and hundreds of articles and podcasts, and he has designed an array of young leader training curricula.

Married to Nancy for over 45 years, the Nelsons have three grown sons and two wonderful granddaughters. They live in Thousand Oaks, California, just north of Los Angeles. For more info on Alan and his speaking, go to www.AlanENelson.com or via LinkedIn.

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Raising Leaders



*The Parents' Guide to Growing
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Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D.

In this parent-friendly book, Dr. Nelson gives parents practical ideas on how to raise leaders in their homes. By focusing on the 5-to-15 Portal, you can elevate the leadership potential of your child.

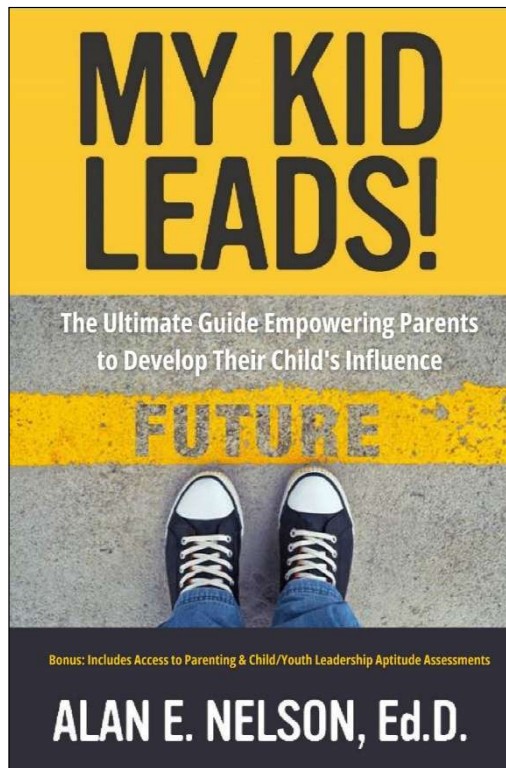
Based on over 20 years of experience, interacting with 1000s of children in eight countries, while training 100s of adults in LeadYoung training curricula, he has learned ways to catalyze leadership skills unlike others in the leadership field.

Now, you can glean from these best practices and create a learning environment in your home.

Although you can purchase this book on Amazon.com, you can download a FREE e-book version of this at KidLead's website: www.LeadYoungTraining.com.

This book is also included in the online course for parents: KidLead Academy. Go to www.KidLead.com for more info and to enroll.

Available on Amazon.com

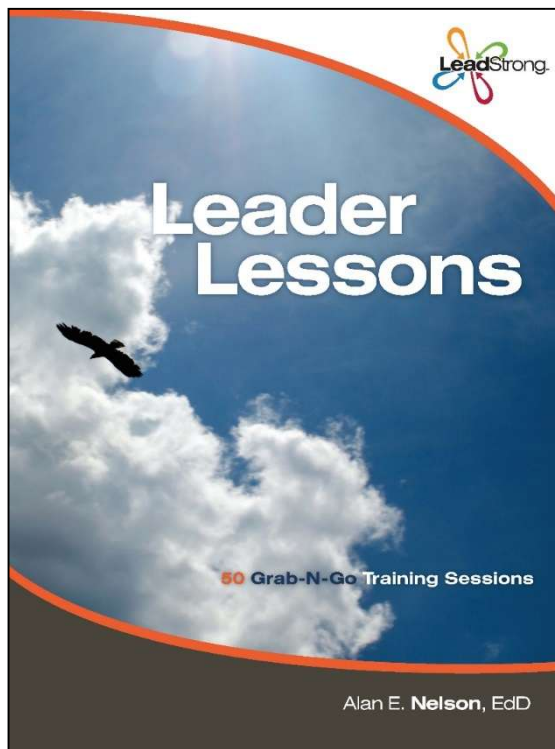


Since 2005, Dr. Nelson has studied how leaders emerge and how to develop them, to be effective and ethical. This how-to book for parents, with kids between the ages of 3 and 18, is **loaded with 44 bite-sized lessons, along with activities to do at home and the community.** The book was first published in 2020 and updated in 2025.

My Kid Leads! is the companion book for an online course Dr. Nelson teaches with videos,

assessments, and other resources, titled KidLead Academy. The course comes highly recommended by experts such as Dr. John C. Maxwell, Dr. Tim Elmore, Dr. Sandra Mashihi, and Dr. Robert Epstein.

The book is available on Amazon.com and Audible.com. For more info on the 7-hour course, go to www.kidlead.com or BestParentCourse.com.

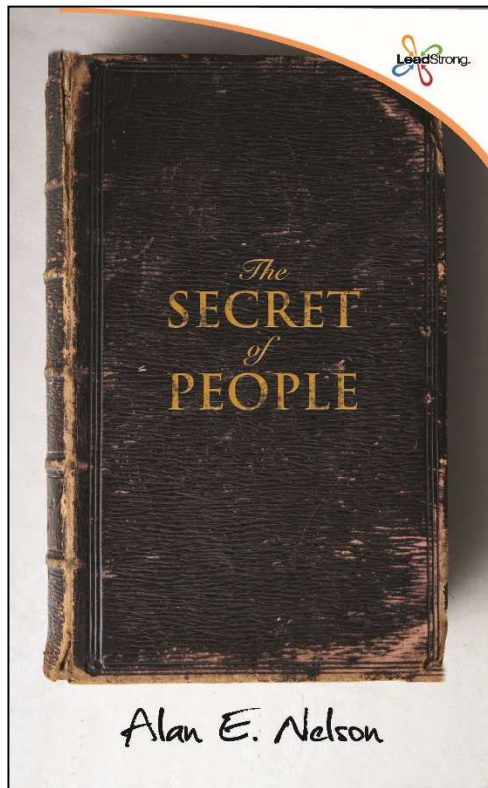


Some of the most overlooked resources for leaders are handy tools for training others how to lead. This is not so much a book as it is a training manual, providing leaders and managers with 50 leadership lessons covering an array of sub-topics. Forty-five of the lessons include a 1-page handout (8x11 format) that can be copied for team members. There's also a 1-page Trainer

section with suggestions on how to use the lesson, whether you have 5 or 35 minutes. The variety of topics allows you to select the ones that fit your situation, helping you train your team.

The final five lessons are discussion guides for movies with leadership themes. These make fun team-building opportunities but with a purpose. Various aspects of leading can be coached out via strategic questions, offered in the lessons.

Available on Amazon.com



In this engaging, fun-to-read narrative, Alan focuses on how to target **the most important single relationship key**: treating people with honor. When people behave in a dishonoring manner, it's usually an indicator of what's going on inside of them, not so much a reflection of others. Instead of reacting negatively, we can refocus our attention to address their real need, a desire to be valued.

The narrative takes place in various coffee shops in Monterey and Carmel, California, as the author interacts with a peculiar sage named Paul. It's an engaging story, but all the while explaining some of the most practical ideas

to help you succeed in your relationships.

Available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

