Sowing Seeds for the Future: Building Life Skills

Whether living harmoniously in a family or successfully managing a household budget, working well with coworkers or finding your place in the classroom, good life skills are essential for everyone. Building those skills in children means sowing seeds in lots of ways, according to three of Great Circle’s transition coordinators who help build these skills in youngsters of all abilities.

Life skills can be “hard” or “soft.” “Hard skills are specific tasks and activities children learn to do at home, school or work,” says Emily Mess, who works on Great Circle’s campus. “Soft skills are harder to teach and include very important intangibles like enthusiasm, teamwork, communication, a positive attitude and other interpersonal abilities.”

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Learning these skills can be a challenge for all children. But if the child struggles with emotional or behavior issues, or has a communications disorder, it’s important to build support and collaboration between school and home to reinforce the skills. “It’s best when they’re practiced in tandem, and children can see how ‘outside’ skills can be applied in the home, and vice versa,” explains Maggie Aubuchon, who works with Mess.

4 simple ways parents can help children build all-important life skills:

1. **Encourage practicing activities that include both “hard” and “soft” skills.** One example is cooking, which naturally blends the skills – safe use of kitchen equipment, choosing and preparing nutritious foods, time management, and creating a meal for others to enjoy. Other examples include managing money, participating in creating a family budget or helping with the weekly shopping.

2. **Suggest trying something new at school or at home.** “At Great Circle, we involve the kids in our campus gardens,” says Mess. For many it’s their first encounter with nature in a purposeful manner. Along with being therapeutic and good exercise, gardening can be very meaningful. “It’s great to see the pride kids have when the seeds they planted become fruits and vegetables ready for harvest. Last Fall, their harvest became a smoothie and juice bar event on campus. It was exceptionally rewarding for them to see the fruits of their labor, and it certainly helped model the concept that hard work pays off!”

3. **Connect skills to future employment.** Employers expect workers to have good soft skills, so “preparing kids to become successful adults means looking for real-world skill building opportunities,” says Aubuchon. For example, on Great Circle’s St. Louis campus, students run a campus store, coordinate on-site recycling efforts, and deliver snacks for children in the residential program. Judy Hockersmith, transition coordinator for Great Circle’s St. James campus, suggests looking for ways to help “students learn important pre-employment skills, such as how to dress for a job, take constructive criticism, and get along with a supervisor and co-workers.” Her students practice those skills by “working” an hour a few times a week in the school cafeteria, answering office phones or assisting in other on-site programs. Adds Mess, “We also take the kids to the human resources department of a local hospital so they can practice creating resumes and doing mock interviews.”

4. **Work effectively within a person’s abilities.** Not every child is suited to earn a college degree, but everyone needs life skills, agree the transition coordinators. They recommend working collaboratively with teachers or other caregivers to create opportunities that accommodate a child’s cognitive or social/emotional challenges. “It’s important to carry over a child’s success away from home into a positive at home, and vice versa,” says Aubuchon. “If mom says her son loves using the computer or vacuum at home, we can turn that into something constructive he can do at school, which becomes a positive, real-life experience for him.”

It’s never too early for children to begin incorporating life skills into their daily routine, says Hockersmith. “Problem solving, conflict resolution and good communication skills are just as important to practice at home as at work.” Adds Aubuchon: “At Great Circle, we work with the family to help sow the seeds that will grow into a lifetime of success, based on each child’s individual strengths, interests and capabilities.”

Great Circle provides a unique spectrum of behavioral health services for children, adults and families facing personal challenges or difficult circumstances. For more information about Great Circle’s educational, transitional and day treatment programs that help strengthen children and families, visit greatcircle.org.